

Title: A Smarter Hunt

Rating: PG-15, A/U, Action/adventure, Drama

Summary: What would have happened if Harry had been a little smarter in book 7? Here's my version of book 7. (H/G, R/Hr)

(A/N: More cleaning of the hard drive... This will be a 3 chapter story of about 35K-words

The story starts around Halloween. This timeline does not totally fit within the real book 7, but it's close and where I want it. :) Assume the events from around Sep 1 in the story timeline in book 7 are about where we start at Halloween in this story.

Yes, I know I'm not the first person to think of using "them" to help, as I've seen one other story do this too (sorry, I can't remember the title to provide credit). I'm using "them" because it fits so nicely with the general premise and the other parts I want to do.

Because this is meant to be a replacement for book 7, the 'ships will be as in the books. FYI for those who hate those 'ships. :-) However, unlike book 7, R/Hr don't receive too much "page time".

In my mind, this story should be rated PG-15, but because of the rating system used here, I'm forced to bump it up to R (or M). This is only for 1 act that might be a little disturbing to some and is done several times. It's not graphic, but it's not a nice thing either.

Last, but definitely not least, I'd like to give a big thank you to XRaiderV1. He volunteered to beta for me on a trial basis. Things have gone well and it looks like he'll also beta my next longer story too -- which will only appear on as it's not SIYE compliant.)

A Smarter Hunt

Chapter 1

Harry threw his quill down in anger. "Damn it! There's got to be an easier way than this." He seethed at the injustice of all that had been

thrown on his shoulders. To make matters worse, they did not seem to be making any progress on tracking down the Horcruxes. A small part of him wanted to give up, but the real Harry never would.

Hermione looked up at him. "I know it's hard, Harry, but we have to keep going."

"I know," he huffed, "I'm not giving up, but that's far easier said than done. Look at it," he pointed to the blank parchment in front of him. "After sitting here for an hour, I can't think of a single new place to go look. All we have are your guesses at the moment, Hermione."

"I don't think even Dumbledore thought it would be easy, mate," Ron told him. "If he had, he would have had someone else do it. Then there's the whole trust issue too," Ron added the last part almost as an afterthought.

Harry stared at his friend for a moment before a grin started to break out on his face. "You're brilliant, Ron. Right up there with Hermione," he paused for a moment to let Ron's expression almost start to glow with the praise, "at least when you want to be," Harry tagged on, watching his best friend practically melt into a glare at the joke.

"That wasn't nice, Harry," Hermione got after him.

"You're right," Harry admitted contritely. "I was joking, mate. You really were brilliant there a minute ago no matter how much I make stupid jokes. I'm sorry I said that."

Ron's grin returned, whatever ill will he had felt a moment ago already forgotten. "Thanks, but what did I say?"

"You pointed out that we don't have to do this, assuming we can trust someone else to do it right. And I know just the people." Harry started looking around for his cloak.

"Who, Harry? If it were that obvious, wouldn't Dumbledore have done it?" Hermione questioned him with narrowed eyes, looking like she sure he was having a lapse in judgment.

Harry stopped and looked at them for a moment. "I believe Dumbledore didn't do this because he was of the opinion that only he could do a good enough job. As for my idea, I think it's best you don't know. I'm not sure you'd be happy knowing."

Now Hermione threw her quill down and glared at him. "Harry, after all we've been through..."

"Yeah, mate!" Ron said, becoming as indignant as Hermione.

After all they had been through, he thought and then slowly nodded. "Well, just remember that you asked, OK?" Harry waited until he got two nods. "There are people who will do anything if the price is right. We just have to hire them and swear them to secrecy before we give them our information and then let them do everything but the final deed."

"Who?" Ron asked. Hermione looked just as perplexed.

"The Goblins," he said calmly.

"The Goblins! Are you crazy?!" Ron shouted. "They'd sell their mothers if the price was right."

"Precisely," Harry agreed with a smile. "All we have to do is come up with a good contract and get them to agree with it. We've got Sirius's money to help."

"I can't believe you're even considering this, Harry James Potter. That is preposterous," she accused him. "Actually, it's beyond absurd..."

"Hermione!" Harry shouted to get her to shut up for a moment. "Didn't you tell me that your parents had, uh, uh, out-sourced I think you said, some of the work around their office?"

"Yes, they out-sourced their accounting," Hermione grudgingly admitted. "But this is not the same thing. It's not even in the same league."

“Magical oaths and magical contracts, Hermione,” Harry reminded her, getting a disparaging look in return.

It would take two more hours to wear them down, but Harry did it and kept the smug look off of his face at the end. Now all they had to do was come up with a contract and Hermione would help him with that.

With the extra free time this would give him, Harry could train more and there was one other thing to keep him busy.

The next morning, with contract and other papers in pocket and glamours all over him, Harry went to Diagon Alley with his cloak on and hood up, like almost everyone else that was there, and that was a small number of people. The shopping district was sparsely populated due to fear of Death Eater attacks.

Fortunately he made it to Gringotts without a problem. Inside, he walked up to one of the surly looking goblins at the counter. The goblin took nearly half a minute before he gruffly said, “What do you need?” Apparently the creature had hoped Harry would have gone away during the wait.

“I wish to contract a service,” he said quietly.

The goblin sneered. “We don’t work for your kind.”

He had been prepared for this. “But you already do, as you guard my money. The transaction can be ... very profitable ...” His voice trailed off, but there was no doubt he had been heard based on the goblin’s twitch.

After a moment of examining him, the goblin crooked his finger at Harry and got off of his stool. Harry followed him to a back room, where he was seated in a small office with nothing in it but a desk and two chairs.

It took nearly twenty minutes before an old goblin entered the office and took the chair behind the desk. “What do you want?” he asked, only a little less surly than the goblin clerk.

“I wish to make a contract with the goblins to do a few tasks, one of which I think you will greatly enjoy,” Harry threw out in one quick breath, trying to prevent his nerves from showing.

The goblin studied him. To make it a little easier, Harry slid a small gold key across the desk.

“This will identify me, if you don’t already know who I am.” Harry would not put it past the goblins to know every person who walked in, regardless of dress, magical garment, disguise, or even under Polyjuice.

The old goblin picked up the key and held it for a minute before putting it back down on the desk in front of Harry. “This account does not have enough funds to hire us.”

“I’m not surprised, but if you know whose account that is, then you also know that I recently inherited an account that does have enough,” Harry countered.

“Perhaps,” the goblin grunted, as if he did not like admitting that. He continued to stare at Harry.

“I do not wish to give offense, so is there a special title or name I should call you?” Harry asked, trying to be firm yet polite.

“Director will do. What work do you wish to contract out?” he gruffly asked.

“Two tasks and they are somewhat connected. I need some items found. After you collect them, I wish to watch you destroy them as they are cursed. If you can break the curse without destroying the item and wish to sell the original clean item for a little extra profit, that is acceptable too. There will be traps guarding these cursed items, so you will have to be careful. There may also be wizards guarding these items; if so, you may kill them and it will probably be to your benefit to do so.”

The Director’s wiry eyebrows rose at that. “Really? You would want us to kill wizards?”

"Yes," Harry said with a grim smile, although it made him slightly sick inside to think about that in detail. "The second task is optional, but for every wizard or witch of a specific type that you kill, I will pay you. This type of wizard or witch is the most likely to be guarding the items I seek, so you have an excellent chance of collecting this bonus multiple times."

"You intrigue me," the Director admitted after a moment of contemplation. "You allow us sport and pay for it. The fact that you hire us allows us to do this and not break the present treaty. Why?" He stared intently at Harry.

"Because, Director, while I can give you some ideas of what to look for and where, I don't know where the items are, nor do I want to take the time and effort to find them. You have resources I do not. You could have multiple teams do this and find them far faster than I could. You also have the expertise to break the curses and traps surrounding the items. I've also heard the rumors that these people I would pay you to kill have not treated you well." Harry had put his cards on the table; now he waited -- and hoped for the best.

"These wizards and witches would be Death Eaters, would they not ... Mr Potter?"

Being named did not surprise Harry; he had presented his vault key. "I'll give you a thousand Galleons for every recognizable Death Eater corpse you can produce. Such a corpse is easily identified by the Dark Mark on the person's left arm. On the other hand, for every innocent that is killed, unless they attack you first, there is a three thousand Galleon penalty," Harry said. "I don't want innocents slaughtered."

"Two thousand per Death Eater."

"If I agree to two thousand per Death Eater, then the penalty for dead innocents becomes six thousand," Harry said firmly. Hermione had pointed out the fatal flaw in the plan that the goblins did not have to disclose dead innocents, but some effort had to be made to prevent financing a goblin-wizard war. The contract stipulated that all wizards

killed had to be presented. Harry, Hermione, and Ron hoped that would be enough to close the loophole.

The Director looked surprised. "Are the Death Eater's families really worth that much?"

Harry hated bargaining over someone's death, but he felt the Death Eaters had signed their own death warrants when they took the Mark. However, the others had not. "I will not pay for a war on innocents. That is a doorway I will not walk through. But those who have formally decided to leave the path of humanity and respect for life, no matter what form: Goblin, Centaur, Elf, Veela, Human, whatever, I believe they have given up their right to hurt others further."

The goblin looked at him for a long moment before he nodded. "And the items you want found and destroyed? Should we accept the task, of course..." The Director's expression gave no clue as to what his final answer might be.

"The current Dark Lord, formerly Tom Riddle, underwent an evil ritual six times. Each time, he split a part of his soul off and transferred it to some significant thing, or at least it was significant to him. Each of those things has been hidden somewhere in England. We have found and destroyed two of them. It is the remaining four we seek. I can tell you what I believe three of them to be and where I am almost certain one of them is located. I can give you research notes detailing this. I can also give you some memories, viewable in a Pensieve, that may help." Harry wondered if they would balk at going against Voldemort so directly. The trio had guessed it would depend on how badly they had been treated by Tom and his Death Eaters.

"We have heard rumors that such rituals were done. You ask us to risk becoming involved in a war we have no desire to be a part of," the Director objected, but not strenuously.

"I have heard of things they have done to goblins for sport. I offer you the chance at revenge." Harry was starting to sweat as the negotiations stretched out; he hoped it did not show.

The Director waved that off. "We can kill for revenge when we want."

"This is a very specific hunting license with a prize. I will also say that while I do not think that Delores Jane Umbridge is a Death Eater, if you should produce her corpse, I will pretend she has a Dark Mark. Given her size, I'll even pay double." Harry smiled, although he kept his mouth shut. He knew there was no love between the fat toad and the goblins, thanks to all the laws she had pushed against non-humans.

When the goblin did not say anything for a moment, Harry added, "There is also a list of Death Eaters that if you can capture them alive and let me talk with them in private for an hour before you execute them, I'll pay you double for them too."

There was silence for several minutes, while each looked at the other. Harry wondered what the goblin was thinking, or what he was more likely calculating. Hopefully, it was profits that could be made.

"What do you offer for each item?" the Director finally asked.

"Twenty-five thousand Galleons for each that you find, and another ten thousand for each that you destroy -- as I watch." Harry almost held his breath, as he seemed to be making progress.

The goblin laughed. "Fifty thousand for each we find and twenty-five thousand for each we destroy."

Harry smiled as Sirius's account had enough and it saved the lives of his friends, as well as sped the war up tremendously. "I have a contract." He slowly reached into his robes. The goblin stiffened and his hand twitched, but Harry kept going, albeit slowly. He pulled out a roll of parchment and laid it on the desk. Reaching in twice more, he pulled out another parchment and a self-inking quill, and finally a fist-sized chest. He unrolled the first parchment, then using his quill, he filled in a few blanks with the numbers they had agreed upon.

He passed the contract to the goblin, who read it very carefully. He grunted at the end before he put it on the desk. "Acceptable." He pulled out a midnight-black colored quill and signed the contract, before passing it back to Harry.

Harry was about to sign the bottom with his quill before the goblin stopped him. "My quill," the Director commanded and offered it to the wizard.

Harry shrugged and grabbed it. With the first stroke, he realized exactly what he was holding. As he scratched out his name, he felt the same letters scratched being applied to the back of his hand and his name was signed in red.

The goblin took the contract and quill back. He also searched in the desk and pulled out more parchment. With a complex waving of his clawed hand, the empty parchment filled with words. He handed the copy to Harry. "You said you had research notes."

"I do." Harry handed the roll of parchment over.

The goblin looked it over. After a minute he hissed. "What trickery is this?" The goblin's face held raw fury.

"What?" asked Harry, genuinely confused. "That is everything we know."

"Not what, where? You believe there is an item in one of our vaults? We can not get it without the owner. If we did, it would violate every treaty in existence causing instant war!" The goblin slammed the contract on the desk, breathing a little harder than normal.

"I didn't know about that part of the treaty," Harry said, the goblin look at him incredulously, as if that excuse would matter. "You do realize that the owner of that vault is a Death Eater?" Harry threw out, trying to calm the volatile situation.

"That does not matter," the rage continued. "For us to coerce an owner is the same as if we broke into the vault."

Harry thought furiously. "What if I brought the Death Eater in or perhaps got her to sign something? Maybe a sale of the item from her to me?"

The Director's glares stopped and he sat there for a moment, obviously deep in thought. Eventually, his scowl turned into a grin that showed many sharp teeth and he chuckled. "Yes, that would be sufficient. A contract of the sale with a transfer request from her vault to yours." He picked up the black quill and threw it to Harry's side of the desk. "It must be signed with this."

Harry looked at the Blood Quill with disgust and carefully picked it up with a thumb and forefinger only, putting it into a pocket.

The Director laughed. "How will you pay for this, Mr Potter?"

"The Black family vault will fund this contract."

"Very well, consider the money in the vault frozen until the contract is finished. I believe there are a few personal items in there you may retrieve if you feel the need. Per the contract, I will see you in two weeks for a progress report and for signing any payment vouchers."

Harry stood and gave a short bow. "Happy hunting, Director. May your swords and spears sing with Death Eater blood." He hoped that sounded goblin-like.

The Director gave another toothy grin. "And a good day of business to you as well, Mr Potter. If you'll follow me?" The goblin turned and led him back to the lobby.

Harry put his hood up and followed the Director. He wondered how high up the chain of command this goblin was, but at the moment, it really did not matter. Back in the lobby, Harry walked back up to the original goblin he had approached that morning and put his key on the desk.

"I'd like one thousand Galleons from this vault."

"There will be a five Galleon fee for us to do the retrieval," the goblin all but snarled, as if he detested the work.

"I agree," Harry simply said, not wanting to take too much time to go down in the cart himself. If all went well, this would be all he needed until the

war was over. A moment later, a money pouch was set on the counter. Harry pocketed it and left for the Leaky Cauldron, then the Hogshead pub in Hogsmeade via the Floo.

Making sure, his hood was all the way up, he made his way to the bar. When he sat down, the old bar keeper came over. Harry still had trouble believing those two were related. He pulled out a Galleon and set it on the bar, on top of a small slip of paper that said, "Albus said you could get me into H." He made sure the scars on the back of his right hand were visible when the money went down. "A shot of Firewhisky," he said out loud, trying to deepen his voice a little.

The bar keeper scooped the coin and note up at the same time with practiced ease. A moment later, a small glass with an amber liquid with little orange flames dancing on top was put in front of him. Under the shot glass was an old paper napkin. On the corner of it was written, "I am & don't be seen". The writing faded away a few seconds later.

Harry nursed his Firewhisky, doing his best not to choke on it and barely succeeding. As he finished it off, he set the glass down a little heavier than required, which got the bar keep's attention. Harry nodded and walked out the front door. Three steps out, he Apparated to the old park in Little Whinging and then immediately again to the front porch of number twelve Grimmauld.

Upon entering, he was almost immediately accosted by his two best friends.

"What happened, Harry?" Hermione asked in a rush. Ron looked very eager to know as well.

"We have an agreement," he said with a big grin.

She closed her eyes and breathed deeply, once. "I still can't believe we've basically just become murderers. I mean, hiring it done is just as bad as doing the deed" she fretted.

"No, Hermione," Harry fiercely responded. "You and Ron did not. You may have helped me write a contract and do research, but I made the

decision and took it all to the goblins. I did not have to do that, but I did,” Harry argued.

“And I did not have to help you, but I did,” she argued back.

Harry walked over to her and put his hands on her shoulders and got her to look him in the eye. “What you did is like thinking. There’s nothing wrong with that. People think a lot of bad things they never get punished for because thoughts don’t hurt anyone and they don’t take action on the thoughts. I took the action. I changed the thoughts into word and deed. Hermione, I have the prophecy to deal with, you don’t.”

At the mention of the prophecy, she broke down and stepped into his arms, hugging him tightly. Harry patted her on the back and looked over her shoulder at Ron. Ron looked like he could not decide whether to be uncomfortable or not.

“Hermione, you’re family to me; you’re like the sister I never had.” She sniffled and nodded slightly, as if she felt he was part of her family too. Harry noticed that Ron looked at him sharply, as if he had not known that. Jealous prat, Harry thought. “Like a brother protects his siblings, so I’ll protect you and Ron. I’ve done the bad part; you and Ron have the clean conscience.”

“I doubt it,” she said softly.

“Try your best,” he told her. He looked at Ron again. “Help me here, mate.” Harry turned Hermione and steered her to Ron, who happily held their friend. “I have to go somewhere for a few days to provide a distraction.”

Hermione turned, looking alarmed and obviously about to protest, but Harry just put a finger over her lips.

Ron spoke instead. “Mate, we have to go with you. We always have, we always will.”

Harry smiled. “I wish you could, but you’ve gotten too tall, Ron. Stealth and a trusty house-elf will be the best way for me to succeed.

There will be very few Death Eaters where I'm going and I'll have lots of allies."

Hermione gasped. "You're going to Hogwarts!"

He smiled at her affectionately. "Sirius was right about you, definitely the smartest witch."

Despite her blush from pleasure, she tried to argue with him. "But Harry..."

"No," he stopped her. "I have a job, but there is one thing the two of you can do for me while I'm gone." At both of their puzzled looks, he explained. "One of few things I learned where I grew up was Muggle history, or at least history through war movies. Dudley loved them. About fifteen years before we were born, the United States found themselves in a war in southeast Asia."

"The Vietnam War," Hermione supplied.

"Yes," Harry said with a smile. "The documentaries I heard said they had a hard time for the first few years because of the hit and run tactics the locals used."

"Guerrilla warfare tactics."

Harry chuckled. "Is there anything you don't know, Hermione?"

She sheepishly looked down. "A lot, Harry. There's a lot I don't know."

"Well, good, then you'll have something to fill your time for years to come," he joked. "Anyway, I want you two to think of things we can do to distract the other side. If it hurts them and takes them out, all the better, but the goal is to distract them to give the goblins an easier time to work without being found out. That's what I'll be doing at Hogwarts, providing a distraction. It will be small, but every little bit helps."

"Harry..."

“I’m sorry, Ron. You can’t go this time. Work with Hermione. The more unexpected and the safer for us the ideas are, the better for us.” Harry was sorry he could not include his friends in his next task, but it had to be this way. Just like one day soon, he would face Voldemort by himself so as not to let them get hurt.

Ron nodded resolutely. It was obvious he did not like the situation, but he would follow the directions. “When are you leaving?”

Harry was surprised Hermione was not objecting more, but he saw one of Ron’s hands on her arm, as if restraining her. He would have to thank Ron for that later. “A little after midnight, so I have to go take a kip. Also, Kreacher will be with me most of the time, so you’re own your own as far as cooking goes. I’ll make sure you have enough food in the house. Good night.” He turned and resolutely went upstairs.

In his room, he called for the elf. “Kreacher.”

The elf popped in. “Yes, Master?”

“Kreacher, I need for you to do a few things for me. First, I’m about to take a trip and there needs to be enough food in the house for a week for my friends.” He pulled his new money bag out and put it on the dresser. “There’s some money if you need to buy more. Second, I need you to go to Hogwarts without being found out except by other elves. Can you do that?”

“Of course, Master.” Kreacher looked a little offended, as if he thought Harry should know he could do that.

“Spectacular. Go talk to the elves and find out how they feel about things. Are they happy or not, and are they being abused by the bad teachers there. I want to know that if I go there in secret to make things better, will they turn me in or will they ignore me while I work. I need to know before midnight. Can you do that?”

“I can do that, Master.”

“Wonderful. Lastly, I need you to wake me at midnight and have some food with you. After I eat, I’m going to sneak into Hogwarts. I’ll call you when I’m there. I’ll be in what Dobby called the Come-and-Go Room.”

Kreacher bowed and popped away.

Harry packed a small bag he could sling over his shoulder before he got undressed and rolled into bed. He had a plan and it looked good. Of course, the other side could change that view. Hopefully, he would get lucky and do better than they.

“Master?”

Harry’s eyes snapped open. When they did, the lights in the room slowly turned up. He put his glasses on and saw his house-elf with a tray of food and smiled. “Thank you, Kreacher. Have a seat and tell me what you found at Hogwarts.” He started to eat while his elf talked.

The elf sat on the floor. “The bad teachers have been very bad to the elves. They are not liking it. If you will do something about the bad teachers, the elves will ignore you.”

Harry grinned even more. It was easy to oppress the weak and those at the bottom. However, that could bite you too. The movie Spartacus had shown that. Harry had found a book in his primary school library about it after Dudley had seen the movie on the telly. There had not been many details in the book, but it did say that Spartacus and the slaves almost won in their rebellion against the mighty Roman Empire and its armies.

“Master? The elves also say that the portraits must be loyal to the Headmaster. You must be careful of them.”

“Thanks, that’s good to know.” Yes, he thought, this might work very well. He finished his meal and went to the bathroom. It might be a while before he could go again.

Gathering his stuff, he told Kreacher. "Get some rest. I hope to call you in a couple of hours. Once we're there, we can both get more rest. When we aren't sleeping, most of the time, you'll either be getting food or listening to gather information."

"Yes, Master."

"Take care, Kreacher."

Harry walked downstairs and was not surprised to find his two friends waiting for him. No words were said; none were needed. There were long hugs all around. Harry told them both to "Take care" instead of "Good-bye". Ron was stoic; Hermione was working hard to hold back tears. He Disillusioned himself, put on his Invisibility Cloak, and then silenced his feet and clothes. Ready for stealth, he Apparated to the Shrieking Shack. Not seeing or hearing anyone for nearly a minute, he slowly walked to his meeting.

Once outside the pub, he only had to wait a few minutes before someone staggered out. Harry used that opportunity to sneak in. He found an out of the way spot where no one was likely to walk and stood there, leaning against the wall.

There were five people left, all in cloaks with their hoods up. They were in a group of two and a group of three. Harry watched them all and used his time of waiting to wonder what they might be up to. As his meeting time approached, the bar keeper sent all of the customers away and locked up.

Harry walked over and tossed an "I'm here" note on the counter, still not willing to make noise. The bar keeper quietly grunted and waved a hand to follow him. Harry and the old man went into a room in the back.

The man pulled his wand and cast multiple spells for privacy over the closed room.

"It doesn't get much better than that," he grouched.

Harry pulled his cloak off and ended the Disillusionment. "Thanks for your help."

"Don't thank me yet, sonny. Do ya know how much trouble you'll get into if you're caught? They're looking for ya, ya know."

"I know. This is something I need to do," Harry defended himself.

The man snorted. "This is about a girl, isn't it? Ya know this can get you or even many of them up there killed," he said with a steely stare.

Harry controlled his reaction. "I've considered that, carefully. I need some things to happen, including some distractions," he explained.

"There are far better ways to create distractions then going up to that school. Both Carrows are there and they'd as soon fillet ya as look at ya."

Harry was not to be talked out of his mission. "I know who's there. The only real question I have is whose side is Snape really on."

A chuckle and a crooked smile came over the old man. "I think he's the only one who really knows, and that may even change from time to time."

"Can I ask you a question?"

The old man shrugged.

"Do you know the entire plan your brother had? What he expected? Especially of me?" Harry did not expect an answer, but he had to ask.

"Albus share an entire plan?" The man laughed hard, for several minutes. He also coughed and wheezed a few times towards the end of his mirth. "That's good, that's really good. Yeah, pull the other one, lad. Is there anything else ya need before I send ya on your way?"

"No, but thanks for helping me."

Aberforth nodded. "Be careful, Potter. Also, you can't come back this way except between two and eight in the morning. And even then, be absolutely sure no one can follow you."

"Right."

"A room to escape is what you need." With that cryptic remark, Aberforth Dumbledore walked over to a portrait, that was two feet wide by three feet tall, of a very pretty young girl with strawberry blonde hair, and swung it open. Behind it was a tunnel.

Harry gave a last "Thanks!" and crawled in. The tunnel quickly grew large enough to walk in. He pulled his wand and cast the light spell as the portrait closed behind him. It was a long walk, but eventually the tunnel came to a door. Carefully, Harry opened the door and came out into a room with only a few tables and chairs in it. He closed the door behind him and pulled out the Marauders Map. When he looked at it, he laughed. He was in the very place he wanted to be, and had found a new, although difficult to use, way out of the school.

Harry saw a door on the other side of the room. That was not good. He thought about a place for a person to hide and the whole room changed. There was now only one door in the place. He checked it out and found that it lead to a small bathroom. The main room had a bed, a few chairs, and a table. There was no door to the corridor outside and that was good. He thought about one last addition and a small bed appeared next to his bed. Satisfied, he called his elf.

"Kreacher."

The elf popped in. "I'm here, Master."

"We're both here then. I've created a bed for you. Feel free to sleep until morning," Harry said tiredly, despite his nap earlier in the evening.

"Thank you, Master."

Harry watched the elf turn in before he undressed and crawled into bed. He turned off the lights in the room and lit his wand. Looking at

the Marauders Map, he quickly found Ginny's dot, in her dorm room where it should be. Neville's dot was in his room. Luna's dot was only a little harder to find, as he had never looked for the Ravenclaw dorm rooms before. He smiled as he turned off his wand and put everything on the nightstand. The other half of his core team was in place, even if they did not know it yet.

Harry woke to the smell of breakfast, which Kreacher had brought, presumably from the Hogwarts kitchens.

Harry spent the day reading and watching the map from time to time. He grew very concerned that evening when he saw Ginny walk off by herself and then meet Crabbe and Goyle in the Entry Hall. The three walked to a classroom where "Amycus Carrows" was. Harry grabbed his Invisibility Cloak and started putting Disillusionment and Silencing spells all over himself. He all but knew he was going to have to rescue her.

Checking the map and finding out no one was outside his room, Harry had the room create a door and he left, walking very quickly to Ginny's location, watching the Map the whole time. By the time he got there a few minutes later, he saw Crabbe and Goyle approach each side of Ginny on the Map and then walk out of the room with her. Harry was practically seeing red, and readying himself to kill them. The only good thing was that the Map showed neither of the boys nor the teacher had otherwise come that near her in the classroom.

The two big Slytherins came out the door carrying Ginny, one holding each elbow. Harry was only barely controlling himself as he arrived, seeing Ginny barely able to keep herself upright and walk. She was also shaking. It did not take more than a few seconds for him to figure out what had happened. To his surprise, no one talked the entire trip as he followed them closely.

When they got to Gryffindor Tower, Ginny had recovered enough to be able to mostly walk by herself. Crabbe said, "I hope you learned your lesson, Weasley. Purebloods rule." The portrait of the Fat Lady opened up and they let go of her. Ginny stumbled for a step or two and then walked in, only a little unsteadily.

Being careful not to run into Crabbe or Goyle, Harry hurried in after her. He watched her make it over to a chair by the fire with great effort before she collapsed into it. Neville hurried over to her.

"You OK?" he asked her worriedly.

"Fine," she quietly said, obviously lying to put up a brave front. A number of students were watching. She smiled and waved weakly at them, but it was not overly convincing.

"Hold my hand," Neville told her as he knelt down on one knee next to her chair. "Squeeze as hard as you need to." Ginny's hand found his, but she appeared to just be touching it and drawing comfort from his presence.

Harry watched and listened for a few minutes. It was not hard to hear others talk about how this was not the first time for her to be disciplined for standing up for others. As he moved over near them, Neville helped her up and moved them to a couch where he placed her and sat next to her. He held her hand this time and Harry barely heard him say, "Do what you need to, Ginny. I'll be here for you." She nodded slightly but did not otherwise move or say anything, beyond staring into the fire and taking slow breaths. Everyone else seemed to go back to studying.

He was almost upset with what Neville was doing, but in truth, Neville had done very little with Ginny. Certainly, his friend had done no more with her than he himself did with Hermione. Also, he had let Ginny go after Dumbledore's funeral, and maybe this was her being happy, but it still hurt to see her with someone else. He hoped she still cared for him in some way.

His stealth charms still working, Harry walked over and stood in front of them. "Ssh," he barely hissed. The two of them froze at the sound, even holding their breath. Harry pulled out his wand with the tip of it just visible outside of his Cloak. He whispered, "Muffliato," on the three of them.

"There, we can talk now," Harry said in a normal voice.

Neville and Ginny looked they were going to have a heart attack.

"Yeah, I know, it's a surprise for me to be here too, but I came to give you some information. Try to look normal."

"Is it really you?" Ginny asked in a soft and quivering voice, sounding scared to death.

"Yes," he assured her. "Other than your brother who walked in on us, I think only the two of us know that the last time we kissed was in your bedroom."

She nodded but did not seem to relax.

"Are you monitored in here?" Harry asked.

"Just sound," Neville said cautiously, trusting Ginny to know that Harry's answer was valid.

"Right. I don't think anyone can see your laps, but look quickly." Harry pulled out the Marauders Map, which was still activated, and put it in their laps.

They both looked down and saw themselves and a dot labeled "Harry Potter" in front of them.

"Harry?" Ginny looked like she was going to cry.

He pulled the Map back and put it away. "Ssh, it's OK, Ginny. I'm fine and you will be too. Although, I have to know... That's not the first time Carrow has tortured you, is it?"

She looked down, unable to answer.

"It's the third time," Neville finally answered for her. "They don't do it long, mostly about five or ten seconds. Long enough to get your attention and persuade you not to do anything stupid."

Based on how she looked and acted, Harry wondered if she had had a more intense session tonight. "He hasn't done anything else to you,

has he?" Harry asked, his voice growing harder as he thought about what had been done tonight.

She shook her head.

"Have the Slytherins done anything to you?"

She shook her head side-to-side again.

Harry knew his plan was the right one now. "Don't worry about it, Ginny. I'll take care of it, which is what I wanted to talk to you two about."

"No! Don't!" she hoarsely whispered, as if trying to shout but her voice wouldn't let her. She also looked like she was trying to hold back tears. "Please go, Harry. You can't get caught here. You have to fight your battles, and win. This is our battle."

He reached out and his disillusioned hand gripped her slightly shaking hand, which loosely gripped his back. "My battle is still being fought, but things are changing. I think I've become smarter about fighting the war."

"Then go fight and win sooner," Ginny told him fiercely.

Neville watched and said nothing, almost looking embarrassed for being a witness, but knowing he had to keep sitting there for appearance sake.

"One thing I realized is that we need distractions," Harry confided. "I've heard the rumors about here, Ginny, and now that I see what they're doing to you, I'll fix things here to distract them from elsewhere," he said with conviction.

"But people will get hurt," she said.

"I know. I've come to realize that happens in war; but if I do things right, it won't be the good people who get hurt. Both of you, protect the younger ones when the fireworks start. If you're in the Great Hall,

get them under the table. If it's in the halls, get them into a classroom."

"The Carrows are good fighters, Harry," Neville told him. "They're borderline sadistic. I've done my best to make them focus on me, but they like to punish people. They won't take anything lying down."

"I understand. I only have one question before I should go..."

"Harry, it's not what it seems," Neville told him hurriedly, as if he had to get this off of his chest. "I'm just pretending with her, to protect her. Her heart is still yours."

"Thank you, Neville," Harry told him gratefully, his smile unseen by them. "That wasn't my question, but I'm glad to hear it." He squeezed Ginny's hand and felt a light squeeze back. "I need to know about Snape. Do I leave him as Headmaster or not?"

"Yes," Ginny told him without hesitation. "He's still a greasy git, but he does protect us from worse things."

"I agree," Neville said.

"OK, I'll leave him for now. Neville, I'm going to end the spell for you, but start quietly talking to Ginny about things that she doesn't have to answer you on. OK?" Harry asked him as he drew his wand.

"Sure, Harry. Be safe, Harry."

"You too, mate. Finite." Harry squeezed Ginny's hand.

Neville was mumbling about classes, but Harry ignored him and looked at the witch in front of him.

"I'm so sorry, Ginny. If I had known they were doing that to you..."

"Stop, Harry. You have your burdens, I have mine. In fact, you really need to go. It will be hard to get out of here soon," she told him, her voice cracking slightly with emotion.

"I still love you," he told her gently.

"I know, and that's why you have to go," she said, her voice gaining strength by determination of will. "If you stay much longer, everyone else will know you're here too when I...." She stopped herself and squeezed his hand instead of finishing.

"Ron and Hermione are safe and send their love. You'll be safe soon too. Good-bye for now, Gin..."

Harry let her hand go and stood up. As he was about to end the muffling spell on her, he saw her lips move and barely heard, "I love you too." He canceled the spell and walked over by the door. This was harder than when he had left her after the wedding. His heart was telling him to return to her and take her away from all of this. It made him all the more determined to not only do this mission, but to kill Voldemort.

It took nearly ten minutes for the portrait to open, but Harry dashed out after someone else came in. He easily made it back to the Room of Requirement and called his room back into existence. He found the room like he had left it and made the outside door disappear.

Sitting at the table, he started writing down his plans, making a list of what had to happen and in what order. Hermione had influenced him more than he cared to admit sometimes, but this planning was probably for the best. Mistakes could be very costly on this mission.

Not too much later, Kreacher popped in with a snack. Harry ate and managed to get the elf to eat a little. It was actually a big victory, as it was next to impossible for Harry to get Kreacher to eat with him.

"How did your mission today go, Kreacher?" Harry asked while he dug into some ice cream.

"Kreacher found what Master wanted. You must watch for Crabbe, Nott, Goyle, Parker, and Ramsey."

"Hmm, five of them with the Dark Mark," Harry mused. "I had hoped it wouldn't be so many, but that's still doable. At least Malfoy's not here

too. We need to get up at six and have a quick breakfast. Tomorrow morning at breakfast in the Great Hall, your task is to make sure that Headmaster Snape does not get involved too soon. Spill hot tea in his lap, make his robes fly over his head, his chair fall down, whatever you have to do short of attacking him directly. Small injuries from an accident are OK, just not large ones. Understand?"

"Yes, Master. The Snape must not join too soon or be hurt much."

"Exactly. He can't be stopped forever, and I do want him involved, but I need a few things to happen first. Get a good night's sleep, Kreacher. Tomorrow may be a long day." Harry got ready for bed and turned in. He knew what he wanted to happen tomorrow. He hoped fate was kind to him, despite how many things could go wrong.

At six the next morning, Harry quickly took a shower and changed into clean clothes to avoid giving away his presence with body odor. After wolfing down his breakfast, he left his room, getting it to lock behind him, and in full stealth mode, made his way to the dungeons. There he waited impatiently for Theo Nott to come out.

Unfortunately, the boy came out with four others with him. Mentally cursing this bad turn, Harry followed them. When they neared a set of bathrooms, Harry hit Theo from behind with a weak Bladder Emptying charm.

The boy quickly excused himself and entered the bathroom that was right there. The others went onto breakfast, not fearing anything. Harry smiled and entered the bathroom. After ensuring Theo was the only other person in there, Harry soundlessly locked the door.

As the boy came out of the stall, Harry waved his wand and cast, "Imperio." He knew Hermione would verbally blast him about going down to their level, but Harry was tired of always taking the high road. Look where it had gotten Dumbledore -- killed. There was a big difference between him and the Death Eaters. They did this for pleasure and to take over the world; Harry did it only because he had to save the world. He saw it as fighting fire with fire.

"Nott," Harry whispered. "Are you a marked Death Eater?" The boy was struggling a little, but he was otherwise very easy to control. In fact, it was sickening how easy this was to do.

"Yes."

"Do you have a girlfriend or favorite girl?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"You will go to breakfast and act normally. You will also not tell anyone about this. Once you see that both Carrows are at the head table, you will wait one minute, then you will stand and yell at Ramsey to stay away from your girl and then you will cast the strongest cutting curse you know at him and try to make it fatal. After you do that, you will start casting strong cutting curses at the other four student Death Eaters who have the Dark Mark. Do you understand?" Harry asked.

"Yes."

"Once you have killed the other four Marked students, you will attack the Carrows, trying to kill them too. You will kill as many Death Eaters as possible," Harry ordered. "Now go to the Great Hall and follow my orders." Harry released the active part of the Imperio and unlocked the door.

Nott left the bathroom and Harry followed. When they reached the Great Hall, it was about half full. Harry saw Nott spot Ramsey and look at the head table before he sat down. He ate quietly and glanced at the head table every minute or so. Nott was half done eating when the two Carrows walked in together while quietly talking.

Harry quietly crept up behind the female Carrow, standing about a yard behind her. When Nott stood up and started yelling at Ramsey, Harry stepped forward and whispered, "Imperio." Alecko Carrow struggled mightily, but Harry had the stronger will and dominated the woman just as Nott cast his first curse. While everyone was staring at Nott and his antics, Harry quickly whispered, "Kill your brother and

then kill every Marked Death Eater student that's still alive, and then Snape. Now."

Everyone was scrambling after the surprise of Nott cutting off Ramsey's head and then starting to fire cutting curses at Crabbe and Goyle. The teachers were moving too, most of them ducking to the floor.

Snape tried to stand, but his signature black cloak acted like it was alive and used that moment to wrap itself around him. That prevented him from doing anything useful for several crucial seconds.

Amycus Carrow stood to try and stop the apparently insane boy when "Avada Kedavra" was heard at the head table. A sickly green light hit Amycus and he fell. Alecko then turned and cast the Killing Curse at Parker, who never saw it coming as he was dealing with Nott.

McGonagall and Flitwick shot off Stunning spells at Alecko, both hitting her, just after she let a Killing Curse go at Nott. The spell hit true and Nott fell over.

While everyone was watching the last Killing Curse fly across the Great Hall, Harry silently sent a Heart Stopping curse at Alecko. He had really hoped they would have all taken care of each other, but sometimes, you just had to do things yourself. Only the thought of what type of person he had killed kept Harry from losing his breakfast.

With no spells being cast, the large room was suddenly very quiet except for the sound of multiple whimpers and one girl crying. Harry looked around and saw that the majority of Gryffindor and Hufflepuff were under their tables. About half of Ravenclaw was as well. A few Slytherins were under their table, but most had tried to get away from the table and were standing against the wall with their wands drawn.

Snape took charge as his cloak seemed to release him suddenly. "Everyone, stay where you are!" he bellowed, not really needing a voice amplification charm in the mostly stunned silence. He looked around. "Poppy, Filius, Minerva, please check on the students." Snape himself came over and checked on each of the Carrows.

Harry stood out of the way against the wall behind the head table and grimly smiled to himself.

"They're both dead," Snape said disgustedly to himself.

"Headmaster," Minerva called from the main floor. "I would suggest the Prefects take the students back to their common rooms."

"Yes, I was just about to order that," Snape drawled. "Prefects, lead your house back to your common room and stay there for the morning. Your head of house will be by later to inform you of the afternoon schedule."

Noise burst to record levels as the students pushed benches around and started talking about what had just happened. A few more girls started crying too as most students hurried to leave the scene behind them. By the time the Hall was empty of students, Snape had made his way down to join the three professors.

"What do we have, Poppy?" Snape was clearly unhappy.

"All five of them are dead. I was almost able to save Mr Goyle, but he had lost too much blood." She actually sounded sad.

"Bloody effing hell!" Snape cursed. "How am I supposed to explain this?"

No one said anything.

"Where's Potter when you need him?" Snape growled.

"Potter? Why would you want Mr Potter now?" McGonagall asked in the most confused voice Harry had ever heard.

"Because he attracts trouble and I could then blame him for this." Snape muttered another string of curses under his breath out about how fate hated him before he turned to Pomfrey again. "Poppy, please take these to the hospital wing and put them in stasis. I will notify their families." He turned and left, his cloak bellowing behind him.

When Snape had left, the others started to help Pomfrey.

Flitwick was the first to speak. "While I dislike seeing anyone die, I do believe that the school will run a little more smoothly now."

"Filius," McGonagall hissed, "be careful of the walls."

"I don't think my observation is a secret, but your point is well taken," the Charms professor said, as he put a corpse into stasis.

"But what will the response be?" Sprout quietly asked. "Is there anyone worse than them?"

No one said anything for a moment.

"The only ones worse, that I'm aware of, are the three Lestranges. I have trouble imagining You-Know-Who letting them go from whatever they are doing to come here and teach," McGonagall theorized.

"The lessons they would teach would have nothing to do with our curriculum," Professor Vector said.

"We shall have to wait and see," McGonagall concluded the short discussion after casting a stasis spell.

"All five are ready," Pomfrey said. "Minerva, Filius, Pomona, and Septima, if you would each levitate a body and follow me please."

Harry watched the caravan of bodies leave and then left himself, heading for his room. He spent the rest of the day there, with the Marauders Map spread out in front of him, watching for visitors. When he had to go to the bathroom or stretch, Kreacher watched the Map.

The job became harder after lunch, as the students returned to class. The Muggle Studies and Defense classes were led by the Head Girl and Head Boy respectively. Harry suspected everyone was happier with that arrangement.

As dinner was starting for everyone in the Great Hall, Harry notice three new dots suddenly appear at the front gates and start walking in.

“Shit!” he exclaimed and started grabbing his stuff. While not Voldemort, and two cronies, it was the next worst thing. A part of him cursed McGonagall for tempting fate as he finished getting ready. After one last thought, he summoned his broom.

“Kreacher, without being seen, I need you to keep the front doors closed. I don’t want those three people in this castle if at all possible. You can enlist the aid of the other elves, if they will volunteer and also help without being seen.”

Harry did not wait for an answer but sprinted out the door to his room, asking the castle to lock it after him. A window was not too far down the corridor. He flung it open and then jumped out, seven stories above the ground. That gave him plenty of time to get the broom under him and start flying. It also gave him the opportunity to realize the broom was still visible.

The broom quickly disappeared from visible sight with a Disillusionment spell as he flew up and around the castle. He needed to approach the three from the rear. Harry had to think fast. Taking out two should be easy, three at once would be hard, and any one of them would be very hard to beat in a duel. Fighting fair would be suicide and so was not an option, neither was using the Imperius like this morning.

The three visitors were already half way. Damn! What he would not give to have Ron and Hermione here now. He felt sure the three of them could take the last one out in three-on-one. Looking down near the edge of the lake, Harry got an inspiration.

Zooming down, he found a fist-sized rock and then levitated it straight in front of him. They were now a good hundred yards in front of him. This would be over in a few seconds, one way or another. It was also going to hurt like hell and be messy.

Harry lined everything up. Bella was on the right, Rodolphus in the middle, and Rabastan on the left. He put the rock on the left and

aimed his broom for Rodolphus. Keeping it all steady, Harry leaned over the broom and urged it to accelerate as fast as it could. Four seconds later, he let go of the rock, letting it continue on its own, and whipped his wand over and silently cast "Stupefy!"

Rabastan's neck exploded at the same time Bella fell like a sack of potatoes. Rodolphus saw or heard something and started to move. It was a case of good news, bad news.

The end of the broom missed Rodolphus's head by a little less than a foot as he ducked to the ground. Harry's right foot caught Rodolphus's head as he went by, knocking him off balance. Harry could not control the flight any longer, despite his skill. All he could do was to throw on the brakes so he was not going as fast when he hit the ground in -- he hoped -- a semi-controlled way. He tucked as he hit and rolled nearly thirty yards before he came to a stop.

Fortunately, he was still conscious. He looked back at his adversaries and saw that two were down, but Rodolphus was struggling to get up. Cursing, he looked around and saw his wand just out of reach. He stretched and grabbed it, although he nearly screamed at the pain when he pushed off with his injured foot, an injury he had been unaware of until then. Twisting, he fired a Blasting curse at the Death Eater just as the man saw part of him in some way. Rodolphus never had chance to bring up a shield, and that was fine with Harry. The hex hit the man in the upper chest leaving a good-sized hole there. He fell face down.

Momentarily exhausted from the adrenaline rush and the throbbing pain in his foot, Harry lay back down for a minute to catch his breath and to take stock. He hurt in so many places it was not even funny. His right foot and ankle seemed to be the worst though. Knowing he did not have long, Harry forced himself to sit up.

"Kreacher," he called raggedly, his breathing just starting to come under control.

The elf popped in. "Master."

"You can not worry about the doors now. I need you to remove all wands from those three." Harry looked around and could not find his broom. It took a moment for him to remember it was disillusioned. So he did a gentle summoning spell and caught the waver in the air. Carefully, he slid it under him and was pleased to see that it still worked, as he started to hover. Slowly, he flew to the three Lestranges. Kreacher handed him the wands, which Harry stuck in his pocket.

Harry seriously considered sending Rabastan's headless corpse back with something nasty via one of the Portkeys to cause havoc, but could not think how to do it on short notice. Another research project for Hermione, if she had time. Harry bound the other two in ropes.

"Kreacher, would it be possible for you to take Rodolphus and Rabastan and give them both to the Acromantula in the forest and not get hurt?"

"Of course, Master." Kreacher snapped his fingers and the elf and Rodolphus's corpse disappeared.

Harry cast a sleeping spell on Bella, just in case the Stunning spell was not good enough.

Kreacher returned and then disappeared again, this time with what was left of Rabastan. Harry Vanished the mess on the lawn. He also looked up towards the castle and was very pleased to see that no one was coming down. He hoped they had been far enough away that no one had seen the fight.

When Kreacher returned, Harry had another task for the elf. "Can you take Bella back to the Come-and-Go room and watch over her? I don't want her to escape, but I really need to do something before I take care of her," he said through gritted teeth, the pain in his foot steadily becoming worse.

The elf seemed to have to think about that for a moment. "I'm sorry, Master, but Kreacher can not take a prisoner inside the castle."

Harry mentally cursed. There was something about the way Kreacher was looking that piqued his interest. Maybe because he was not part of the castle elf staff... "Kreacher, if I take her back in the window so she's inside the castle, can you then take her to our room and keep her there."

Kreacher brightened. "Of course, Master."

Success, Harry thought. He Silenced Bella before levitating her after him. Once she was in the window, Kreacher appeared and snapped his fingers, both of them disappearing. Now the hard part, he thought.

Harry flew around the castle until he got to the hospital wing. He had to take the end window to avoid being in sight of the Headmaster's tower, just in case Snape was in there. With an unlocking spell, he opened the window and carefully flew in. He had barely made it inside when Madam Pomfrey came out of her office and saw the open window. Scowling at it, she walked over to shut it.

Not knowing what else to do, Harry hit her with a paralyzing jinx and caught her with a Levitation charm. Her eyes were wide with fear as he leaned her against the wall.

"Madam Pomfrey. I'm very sorry to do that, but I need to talk to you without you screaming," he said gently, trying not to scare her. "I know it's hard for you to see me like this, but I'm sure you recognize my voice, considering how many injuries I've had and how often I've visited you over the years. Please don't scream when I release you. I don't want anyone to know I'm here." He pulled the top of his cloak down and canceled the Disillusionment charm so she could see his head, then he cast a Finite on her. She recoiled, although to her credit, she did not scream.

"Mr..."

"Ssh!" he hissed, interrupting her. "I'm told the walls have ears here."

She nodded. "They do, but the ones who monitor them are dead now."

"That works for me, but you don't want this recorded for someone else to find later, do you?" he asked.

She realized he had a point and vigorously shook her head.

"You should convince either McGonagall or Flitwick to make those recording devices disappear," he suggested, getting a nod from her. "Now, I need to get a diagnosis and a few things from you and leave before I'm found. Will you help me, please?" he quietly begged her, hoping she said yes because his foot was killing him.

Pomfrey seemed to have regained most of her composure. A deep breath helped her a little more. "What seems to be the problem?"

Harry dismounted the broom, standing on one foot, and eased himself onto the edge of a bed, where he stuck his right foot up on the bed. "I'm pretty sure I broke it."

She tsk'd and came over. After waving her wand, she looked at him. "You've broken your ankle and crushed a few bones in your foot. Are you able to take it easy for a few days?"

"Yes." Hopefully, he added in his mind, but if duty called, he would have to answer.

"Stay here for a minute then." She turned and went to her office.

Harry locked the hospital doors. At most, it would give him about ten seconds to fly out the window.

Pomfrey returned and waved her wand above his ankle.

Harry felt the swelling go down and something move into a more comfortable place. The loss of the ache there was heavenly. "Thanks," he told her with a large sigh. She nodded and waved her wand again. He felt his leg from just below his knee down to his toes go stiff.

She handed him a small goblet. "Drink it all. It's Skele-Gro, so you should know what to expect." He grimaced and she chuckled. "I

would keep you here overnight if everything was normal. Since that's not possible, I put a bind on your leg to keep it in the right position until the Skele-Gro finishes. Even with all of that, stay off of it for a day, but two would be even better. You also have a number of bruises and pulled muscles, but nothing major."

He handed the goblet back. "I can't thank you enough." He pulled his Invisibility Cloak back up and Disillusioned himself again. Only his broom was now visible.

"If you will, sir," she said to avoid his name, "were you responsible for the morning's events?"

He carefully stood on one leg and mounted his broom before he answered. "As much as I wished people didn't have to die in this war, I am quite happy two of the seven did. I'm sure you know what else I need from you, Madam?"

"I won't say a word," she said softly. "And thank you for ... everything."

"We all do our part." He unlocked the doors before he slowly few out the window and then around to the window he needed to get back to his room and Bella.

As he was about to fly in, he heard voices. He stopped his flight just in time and hid next to the window. Carefully pulling out his map, he saw two names on it that he did not know. He guessed they were fifth year Prefects or something. He had to wait a few minutes. Soon, he was back in the Room of Requirement and had the door hidden behind him.

It was with amusement that Harry noticed the cage that was now in his room, a cage with an unconscious woman in it and an elf in front of it. Harry canceled all of his charms and took his cloak off before he eased himself into a chair, putting his injured leg up on another chair.

"Kreacher, how long do you think she'll sleep?"

“Several hours, Master. She started to wake moments before you arrived, so I had to reapply the sleeping spell.” He looked like he feared he had done wrong, so Harry smiled.

“That was a good job, Kreacher.” The elf looked proud. It was interesting to see what a little praise could do for the poor guy, Harry thought. He pulled out his wand and summoned writing materials. He wrote a short note. “Kreacher, please take this note to Hermione and wait for what she has to give you. Then bring back dinner and we can both eat and rest. I’ll watch over her while you’re gone.”

“Yes, Master.” The elf took the note and left with a pop.

Harry sat back and contemplated what needed to be done next. He could only think of one way to do it and he hoped it worked. With nothing else better to do while he worked up his nerve, Harry pulled out his Map and looked at it. He found Ginny sitting near Neville and Parvati in the Gryffindor common room. He wondered what they were talking about.

Hermione let out a small scream as a pop sounded near her right elbow. Ron chuckled and she glared at him.

“Miss, Kreacher has a note from Master.”

“Thank you, Kreacher,” she said politely, doing her best to always set a good example for Ron.

“What does it say?” Ron asked, putting down his quill, eager to take a break from his task.

Dear H & R,

I’m safe and don’t plan to move for a day or so if I can help it. I banged up my foot, but I got a potion for it and should be fine in a few hours. Really, don’t worry!

Anyway, part 1 and 2 of my plan went off pretty well. I also got a bonus which will lead to us having a cup together in the very near future. That's how I hurt my foot. Again, I'll be perfectly normal in a few hours.

Since I have a little time to sit and think, please send a copy of your list of possible monkey activities for me to consider. Also, please think about how to safely contact F/G, as they may know how to find more help for our monkey business. I hope to return in a day or two.

H.

p.s. The score was 10 for me and 0 for them -- YES!

Ron laughed at the postscript.

"It's not funny," she said, lightly chastising him. "He wasn't supposed to be near more than a 'few' Death Eaters and he found ten." Hermione looked at the elf. "Kreacher, how bad was Harry really hurt?"

The elf did not look comfortable, but he said, "He only broke his ankle and foot. Nurse gave him a potion and he is resting with it up. He is following directions."

"I wonder for how long." She sighed. "If you'll wait here, I'll get the list for you to take back."

A few minutes later, Hermione gave him the parchment Harry wanted and the elf left. "I wish we were with him," she said wistfully.

"I know," Ron agreed fervently, "I know. We're just going to have to trust him. Still, if he thinks we can get a hold of the cup, that must mean he captured Bellatrix. That's quite an accomplishment."

"True, but if we'd been there, maybe he wouldn't have gotten hurt," she said.

"Or maybe we would have instead," Ron countered. "We'll have to wait until he returns to hear the story."

By the time Kreacher returned, Harry had a contract written up. He also had another idea. With the elf there to back him up, Harry put parchment and the Blood Quill just outside of the cage. Thinking very carefully, he applied some glamours. Looking in a mirror, he thought he looked about right. "Man I'm ugly." The altered voice surprised him, even though he was expecting it.

With a wave of his wand, he woke her up. Before she could figure out what was happening, Harry hit her with a strong stinging hex to the cheek. "Bella, I'm so disappointed in you."

"My Lord," she fearfully said as she looked down. "I don't even know what happened."

"You failed and had to be rescued," he hissed. "For your punishment, take up that quill and sign that parchment. I need something I once gave you."

"Yes, My Lord." Bella looked over and saw the midnight-black quill and an enthralled look came over her. "Thank you, My Lord," she said as she picked it up and quickly signed her name to the bottom of the parchment, not even reading what it said.

Harry summoned the contract to him and looked at it, pleased to see the signature there without any magical coercion. He would sign it when he was done with her.

Then he had another idea. To make sure she did as he asked, because it would sound even more crazy to her, he cast "Imperio" on her. She put up a fight for a few seconds before she succumbed. That the fight was that short or that she could not throw it off surprised him. Then again, he considered that maybe she had spent too much time in Azkaban and she was not as mentally strong willed as he had expected after so much exposure to the Dementors.

"Bella, I want you to write down all the names of the Death Eaters that you know and possible places they might be hiding," he

commanded her. He put a regular quill and ink next to the cage for her.

She kept the Blood Quill in her hand, caressing it, ignoring the normal quill in front of her. To Harry's amazement, much like when she had signed the contract, Bella seemed to enjoy using the Blood Quill. She was definitely touched in the head.

Kreacher had to give her two more sheets of parchment to finish the task. Harry just stood there and watched her write, never once flinching from the pain in her right hand -- a hand that was turning darker and darker red.

"Kreacher? Please visit Madam Pomfrey again. Be sure she is alone before you approach her. Tell her that her earlier patient has the need to keep an enemy adult asleep for at least a day and likely for two, and he desperately needs the potions to do that. Also tell her that addiction will not be a problem."

"Yes, Master." The elf popped away.

"Bella?" Harry got her attention, and in her compulsion state of mind, she seemed happy as she was. "Please tell me about any plans I have told you about. I want to verify that you remember correctly." She happily started babbling and Harry made a few notes. Kreacher returned about fifteen minutes later with three phials. Bella kept talking. Kreacher left to go get dinner and returned with enough for both wizard and witch. Harry let her have a last meal as she talked about what she knew.

Her dialog was very interesting to him for the information it contained. He was sure a Mind Healer would have found it even more interesting as he studied her, but the witch would never have that sort of therapy. She talked long into the night about all sorts of things, including magic that Harry had never heard of. She also mentioned a few things that she thought he, the Dark Lord, was afraid of. Harry found that interesting too, but was not prepared to consider it reality, no matter how much her twisted mind believed it. Still, perhaps it was information that could be used if things got desperate. When she was done talking, Harry gave her the sleeping potions. He then wondered

where he could get a Pensieve so Hermione could review this memory.

Taking the Blood Quill from the floor of the cage and putting a Galleon in her pocket, what he was required to give her by the contract, he signed his real name to the bottom of the contract and made it valid. With a smile, he removed the glamours that made him look like Voldemort and went to bed.

(A/N: There's the start of the story and you can already see how Harry has made some major changes -- much more logical changes, at least in my mind. :-)

Chapter 2

At little before eight in the morning, Harry thought about a place to escape and the room changed. He was pleased to see that the cage with Bella in it was present. He supposed that as long as someone else was in the room, they had to stay. He instructed Kreacher to stay there and guard the prisoner before he opened the door in the wall and started down the long corridor. At the other end, he lightly knocked and opened the portrait.

Aberforth looked over at him from a single bed and then at a clock. "You're cutting it close."

Harry shrugged. "I needed some sleep too. What's the best way to get to Gringotts without being noticed?"

"I let ya out the back door with ya being invisible and then ya walk behind one of the other stores and Apparate to Diagon Alley," the old man gruffly said as he got up.

"Right, I can do that," Harry replied too cheerily for the time of day for the old bar keeper, as evidenced by the older man's grimace.

A few minutes later, Harry was carefully strolling through Diagon Alley, keeping a wary eye out for any sort of danger, whether directed at him or not. He arrived at the bank a few minutes after it opened. Harry was presently the only wizard in the bank.

He walked up to a clerk and put his vault key on the counter. "The owner of this vault needs to talk to the Director. If there is more than one director, then I need to talk to one that handles contracts."

The goblin looked at him like he had lost his mind, but took the key and left. A few minutes later, he returned and motioned for Harry to follow him, where he was led to the same office as before. This time, the old goblin was waiting for him.

When they were alone, the old goblin slid the vault key across the desk. "What is so important that you come early?" he asked gruffly.

"I have executed my part of this contract and paid the sum listed. I need the other part to be taken care of, and for you to search the items as they are transferred." Harry slowly reached into his robes and pulled out a parchment, which he set in front of the Goblin.

The Director read the contract and then waved his hand over it. It flashed, but otherwise remained the same. The Director smiled. "Very well done, Mr Potter. However, I would like my quill back. Those don't grow on just any bird, as I'm sure you know." The goblin's grin was predatory.

Harry happily gave it back, and also handed over some more parchment. "I also took the liberty to have her list all of her associates and possible places to find them. The sooner your troops can strike the better I think it will be for all of us."

The goblin laughed heartily and Harry grinned. When he could speak again, the goblin said, "You would have made a good goblin, Mr Potter."

"Thank you for your praise, Director. As you will see as you look over the list, I've crossed ten of them off. They accidentally found me the other day and I took the opportunity handed to me," Harry explained.

The Director grunted. "Unfortunate for us, but a goblin motto is to take any opportunity given."

"I'm sure there are others not on the list," Harry said.

"No doubt. We've already found a few and they are being held for your review at the end of next week."

"You work fast," Harry complimented him. "I hope your warriors enjoyed themselves and didn't get hurt."

The goblin grinned. "Nothing a little healing could not fix for those who were clumsy -- the idiots. Commander Rocknose sends his compliments for the opportunity to train his troops to the correct standard."

Harry bowed his head a little. "I believe this is called a win-win situation."

"Indeed."

"Unless you have something else for me, Director, I must leave to plan some distractions," Harry informed him. "I hope to inconvenience the opposition and cause it to be concerned with matters far from where you are. I fear that if it was known what you are doing, the task would become much harder and I want this project completed as soon as possible."

The Director nodded. "Distractions are a good idea then." He rose and led Harry back to the lobby.

Back in disguise, Harry exited the bank and headed for Knockturn Alley. He did not really want to go here, but he really needed something that he thought would only be found here. Fortunately, being so early in the morning, the criminal element that normally was in the seedy area had left a few hours ago in the early morning dawn hours. It took searching two stores before he found what he wanted. He also had to call for Kreacher to bring his other money bag to him. The item was expensive enough that it cost more than he had on him.

Harry Apparated back to Grimmauld Place after he finished shopping. Walking in, he caught the smell of something burning and hurried to the kitchen. There was a light fog of smoke and a few dishes on the table that looked distasteful enough that he would not eat them unless he had no other choice.

"So who created the burnt offering?" Harry asked the room at large.

"Harry!" Hermione squealed and ran over to him and gave him a hug. When she let him go, she did not look as happy and told him crossly, "I should slap you for the worry you've given us."

"Hey, I sent you a note saying I was OK," he protested good naturedly.

“Harry, good to see you back, mate,” Ron said from his side of the table, forgoing the hug.

“Thanks.” Harry looked at the table. “So what did you do to the food? It looks, er, dead.” He wanted to say it looked like something else, but he knew Hermione would chastise him for his language.

Ron hung his head and Hermione shook hers. “I told Ron that he needed to learn to cook and pull his own weight around here as we wouldn’t always have help to cook. He was in charge of breakfast this morning.”

“Ah, it’s good that I ate earlier then,” Harry said teasingly.

“Harry, can you whip up something? Please?!” Ron begged. “Hermione has refused to do so this morning.”

He looked at the food and then shook his head. “Let’s call it incentive for you to learn, Ron.” Harry winked at Hermione as Ron groaned and then started picking through the food, trying to find the least burned parts. She beamed at him for supporting her.

“What have you been doing, Harry?” Hermione asked, taking a seat back at the table. She picked up the least burned piece of toast she could find and then took her knife to scrap the burned part off.

“You mean there’s been nothing in the Daily Prophet about what happened at Hogwarts?” he asked incredulously.

“No,” Ron answered. “Just the usual about attacks from a few deranged individuals and the Ministry trying their hardest to keep up. It’s pathetic, really. It’s obvious they support the Ministry and the Death Eaters.”

Harry shook his head. “I went to Hogwarts to cause a distraction or two and to check out the rumors of abuse we’ve heard.”

“Is Ginny all right?” Ron quickly asked, his concern obvious..

“Yes, I talked to her and Neville for a few minutes.” He did not plan to say what Carrow had done to her. Ron did not need to hear that and he did not want his friend to go off and do something stupid, like he had almost done.

“And?” Hermione prompted when Harry did not immediately continue.

“The rumors were mostly true. Hogwarts was not a great place to be, so I took out the trash,” Harry said with a smile. He then told them most of what he had done, leaving out a few details like using the Imperius, instead saying he had started a fight between the Death Eater students while invisible. Ron was impressed at the part of taking out the three Lestranges. Hermione was too, even if she was a little vexed at him for getting hurt. At the end, Harry pulled out a small box and put it on the table before enlarging it. He then pulled a small rune covered stone bowl out of the box and set it in front of his two friends.

Hermione looked very surprised. “Harry, is that what I think it is?”

Instead of answering, he used his wand and pulled out several memories, including the one of his talking to Bella. “You need to watch these as soon as you can. There’s information that can be used to our advantage.” The two nodded. “Also, have you been able to contact Forge?”

“I did yesterday,” Ron answered. “He says they know of about a dozen people who can be completely trusted and are willing to do things, if they had someone telling them what to do. They want to make a difference, but they don’t know how.”

“Wonderful,” Harry said with a smile. “I want you to start working with them on what you called Operation Entrapment. That looks easy and relatively safe. It will also spread the Death Eaters and their supporters out and make them think there is a large number of people opposing them. Also, no one is to know about the goblins but us three, as it relates to the mission Dumbledore gave us.”

“I wished we could tell others,” Hermione said for the fourth time since Harry had come up with the plan.

“And you know why we can’t. Now, I have a few ideas that need researched and then the two of you can duel with me to help me work out,” Harry told them. He laid out what he thought they were missing. Hermione looked a little sick at the ideas, but agreed to search for a way to do what he wanted.

After their talk, the three went to an empty room and worked on spells. Hermione taught them both some new ones she had found. There was still no “killer idea” on how to handle Voldemort, but Harry knew they had a little time still.

Late that night, Harry returned to the Hogshead pub and then Hogwarts. Kreacher reported that Bella had not woken up from her potion-induced sleep and that no new visitors had come to Hogwarts. The elf did report that the Map had shown that Headmaster Snape had left the castle for several hours. Harry suspect that the greasy git had not received a warm welcome back at Death Eater Headquarters and that did not bother Harry in the slightest.

Two days later, no new Death Eaters had shown up at the school, so Harry decided that the school was probably safe for the moment and decided to leave. Wanting to go see his favorite person there but not daring either of them to restrain themselves, he sent a note to Ginny via Kreacher saying he would see her at Christmas. To wrap things up, he gave the still sleeping Bella some poison to stop her heart. Once she was dead, he took out of the castle and let Kreacher take her to the giant spiders. He then went back inside and left via Aberforth’s room at a little before two in the morning, just as the bar keeper was going to bed. Harry was at home in his bed at Grimmauld Place a few minutes later.

It had been a week since Harry had cleansed the school of Death Eaters. He picked up the Daily Prophet Kreacher had retrieved for them and saw the headline of another family being attacked. It was the third straight day that the family of a Muggle-born student in Hogwarts had suffered in what Harry assumed were reprisals from his work at the school. Each report like this sickened him, but he knew he had to stand firm.

Hermione walked into the kitchen. “Morning Harry.” She eyed the newspaper in his hands. “Anything special happen yesterday?” she asked with a little concern in her voice.

Ron walked in at that moment and sleepily sat down at the table, not saying a word to anyone for the moment. It was sort of his normal routine.

“Another family of a Muggle-born student was attacked last night, but there was good news.”

“Oh?” Hermione looked at him hopefully.

“The family all survived and from what I read, it looks like the family killed two Death Eaters too,” Harry said with a grim smile.

Ron stopped eating for a moment. “Wait, the family, they were Muggles, right?”

Harry nodded.

“Then how did they kill Death Eaters?” Ron asked in confusion.

Harry’s smile became predatory. “The Prophet says they used a ‘fire stick’, which I assume they mean the family had a gun of some kind.”

“That would do it,” Hermione agreed a little warily as she sat down. “So much violence...”

“They started it,” Harry reminded her. He looked at Ron. “So, it’s our turn to help with Operation Entrapment today?”

Ron swallowed. “Yeah, we’re supposed to meet at the Shrieking Shack at ten. Bill says there’s a house not too far from there that’s abandoned and somewhat isolated.”

“Right,” Harry agreed as he looked at the clock, seeing they had two hours before action.

At promptly ten, the trio Apparated to their meeting point. Remus, Tonks, and Bill were already waiting for them. Nods were used for greetings.

"This way," Bill softly told them and started leading them down a path that headed a little north of the magical town. About fifteen minutes later, he came to what looked like an oversized shack. "You three, go inside and light the fireplace and a lamp. Wait five minutes for us to get ready and then say the magic word. When they arrive, if the force is too large for us, I'll create a bang as the signal to immediately Apparate away. Otherwise, I'll immediately put up wards to keep them here and we'll try to take them out. The second you hear spells firing, come out and help, but remember that we'll be Disillusioned, so Stunners only. Got it?"

The trio agreed and went into the house. It was a mess, an indication that someone had left in extreme haste. Harry lit the fireplace while Hermione found and lit a lamp, placing it near the window. Ron pulled an overturned table to the side so they could hide behind it, in case the Snatchers Apparated directly inside the room. Snatchers normally arrived a little ways away and tried to sneak up on you, but Ron knew that assuming in a case like this was dangerous.

Harry looked at his watch and they all waited behind Ron's barricade, still not saying anything. When the time was up, he pulled his wand; the others did likewise. "You know, I think the key to defeating Voldemort is to laugh at him like a Boggart."

Hermione's eyes went wide at the idea. It was Ron who rose to the occasion. "No mate, if you want to beat V-Voldemort, then we need to transfigure him into stone, then you can take a hammer to him at your leisure."

Harry snorted at the idea, just before they all heard several Apparation cracks. To draw them to the house, Harry did his best to laugh loudly. A moment later, they heard spell fire and all rushed for the door. Harry made it first.

Outside, he saw a man go down before he registered there were already three others that were unconscious. Harry quickly moved

away from the doorway to let his friends out, and so they would not be standing in a group where a single spell might get all three. He did not see anyone else.

Bill suddenly became visible and Harry almost hexed him. "Careful, Harry. These four were all we saw. Quickly, bind them and we'll Portkey them away to our holding area. We can't stay here long or others might come."

The four Snatchers were relieved of their wands and Portkeys before being bound and the rope was turned into a Portkey. Bill took down his wards and sent the prisoners to Fred and George. "Good work you guys."

Harry chuckled. "We didn't do anything."

"You were bait and that was required," Bill told them with appreciation. "Apparate to at least two different places before going back to your hiding place. We'll do a few fake calls, where someone says the bad word and then immediately leaves, over the next day or two before we do another capture. We have to leave them guessing."

They all said their good-byes and left.

Harry was pleased to note that there was no report of attacks the next morning in the Daily Prophet. He assumed that this was just a lull, but he hoped it was the start of a new trend. He also hoped the Goblins had captured a lot of Death Eaters using the information from Bella. They were taking the war to Riddle and they were making a difference.

Harry made his way to Gringotts. It was time for his first progress report, two weeks after the contract had been agreed to. He guessed the goblins would have a number of Death Eaters to show him, considering the number of Death Eater attacks had dropped in the last few days.

Inside, he did not even have to ask for the Director. There was a goblin waiting for him to escort him to a large cave in the vault area. There was a younger, but still very mature, goblin with the Director.

“Director, I trust the project has gone well?” Harry said after a small bow.

The old goblin nodded back. “Hunting has been good,” he said with a toothy grin. The other goblin gave a short grunt, causing the Director to remember him. “This is Commander Rocknose. Commander, our client, Mr Potter.”

“Mr Potter,” Rocknose barked curtly. The goblin warrior looked hard, ready to take on the world and win, hard. This was a no-nonsense goblin who looked like he had reached the top the hard way and had liked the tough climb. This was a goblin that Harry knew he did not want to cross, not that he wanted to cross any goblin. The sword belted to the goblin’s waist reinforced that idea.

“Commander. I hope none of your troops have gotten hurt?” Harry hoped showing concern was a good thing.

“Only the stupid ones get hurt and they deserve it,” Rocknose said gruffly.

What did one say to that? Harry just nodded and turned to the Director. “So, what has been found so I can verify it?”

He was led to a small room on the side. When the door was opened by the Director, cold seeped out as they walked in. There were eighteen bodies in the room. A list of names was passed to Harry. “We will take bonuses for these and a double bonus on that one.” The director pointed to a large body that was mostly in pink.

Harry walked over and saw that it was indeed Umbridge. He glanced at the back of his right hand as he made a fist. The words engraved on his hand stood out before he released the fist. “A bonus that is well earned,” he said before he turned around.

“Did you suspect she had one of the items when you sent us to her?” the Director asked with an almost amused tone.

That surprised Harry. “Did she really have one?”

The Director led him over to a shelf. On it was a heavy golden locket and a teacup with a badger on it. Harry grinned and started to draw his wand when he heard steel on leather. He froze with his hand on his wand but it was still in its holster. Turning slowly, he saw Rocknose with his sword inches from Harry's neck.

"My apologies, Director," Harry said very contritely, still not moving. He was also quite nervous. "May I draw my wand to verify these two items are what I seek? I will not face you while doing so, and the Commander is welcome to keep his sword out if it makes either of you feel better." Not that Harry could really dictate terms in goblin territory.

After a long moment, the Director said, "That is acceptable. You will ask first before you reach for your wand next time."

"Of course, Director," he said with a forced calm. "Again, my apologies for not thinking. I will draw it slowly after I turn around." Without haste, Harry turned to face the shelf and the wall before he slowly pulled out his wand. Hermione had taught him a spell to detect an object that was a transfigured human, and she thought it would detect a Horcrux. He cast it and the locket tested positive by glowing red. The cup also tested positive.

He then slowly put his wand up, held his hands up, and then turned back around. Rocknose's sword tip was still inches from his neck. At a nod from the Director, the Commander stepped back and sheathed his sword.

"You have indeed found two. Congratulations. I will happily pay the finder's fees and bonuses. Did you plan to destroy these or break the curses and sell the relics?" Harry was curious. In a way, it would be a shame to lose them, but if that was required to defeat Voldemort, then he was prepared to lose them.

"That has yet to be decided. Those will stay in here for now, as only I can open this vault." The Director shouted something in his language and a small team of goblin warriors came in, each grabbing a body

and dragging it out. The three followed and the Director shut the door, leaving only the two Horcruxes inside.

“There is one other matter. We have captured a few ‘innocents’ as you call them. I thought you might want to see them before we sent them away to their final destiny.” The Director’s expression was his usual neutral one, but the Commander’s showed a grin.

Harry suspected the fate of the prisoners would not be a pleasant one. Fortunately, he was prepared for this, as they had run into the same problem over the last week and a half. While creating their diversions, they had captured nearly twenty people, but only four of them had the Dark Mark. Hermione had come up with the idea of using Veritaserum to question them. It had not been cheap to buy.

“I would like to give them a truth potion to test their intentions. If they are like those who have a Dark Mark, even if they do not have one, I am prepared to let you deal with them as you wish.”

“Otherwise?” Rocknose growled.

“Otherwise,” Harry said, far more calmly than he felt given how fierce the Commander looked and acted, “our contract states that if they did not attack you first, they should go free. Of course, it would probably be wise to remove their memory of this place before setting them free.”

Rocknose did not look happy, but he stopped arguing. The Director took them to another cave; this one was guarded by four goblin warriors.

There were six single men and one family of a husband, wife, and a little boy. The family was huddled in a corner by themselves. After he explained what was going on and that they would take the truth potion if they ever wanted to leave here, the family volunteered first.

Harry was pleased to find that they had been visiting a relative who was a Death Eater and they had done nothing when the fighting had started, other than to hide. The Director promised they would be

made to forget their time in goblin hands and released later today. The other six were not so lucky. All six proclaimed their allegiance for Voldemort and would take the Dark Mark if given the opportunity. Harry shook his head at the waste of lives. The Director did not volunteer what would happen to the six and Harry did not ask. He suspected they would become slaves or serve the goblin warriors in target practice. That was troubling, and yet, considering what they were willing to do to the Wizarding World, he did not lift a finger to save them. He was not Dumbledore, ready to give everyone a third chance.

As Harry bid the goblins good-bye, he found the thoughtful penetrating stare from the Commander to be a bit unnerving, but he did his best to ignore it and left.

Four weeks later, Harry returned to Gringotts for his third progress report. He had little fear in walking through the shopping district, as the number of Death Eater attacks had continued to drop dramatically in the last few weeks. The Ministry had also started to turn itself around, as it lost some of its darker element, or those who supported Voldemort.

Hermione theorized that as Death Eaters died, those they placed under an Imperius curse were freed, and there were few Death Eaters who could do the curse really well, who also had access to some of the top Ministry officials. It all made sense to Harry and also made him wonder why no one had ever killed the Death Eaters before. But he quickly came up with the answer: Dumbledore and Fudge.

The ex-Headmaster had tried to save everyone, and in doing so, had actually hurt the Wizarding World, at least in Harry's view. Surprisingly, Hermione was starting agree with him that Wizarding World needed "cleaning". Ron had always agreed him on this topic. Fudge had simply been greedy and corrupt, willing to sacrifice the Wizarding World as long as his pockets were lined with gold.

Based on the list Bella had created and Harry had given the goblins, they had presented him with seventeen Death Eaters and eight more sympathizers two weeks ago. He and his teams had caught two

Death Eaters but twenty-four “Snatchers”, who were all sympathizers. This was one of the things he needed to talk to the goblins about.

He walked into the bank a little early today and told a clerk that he needed to see the Director; he was instantly taken back to the private goblin vaults.

“Director,” Harry bowed politely.

“Mr Potter.” The head goblin gave him a nod of greeting. “We have eleven more for you to inspect and one on your special list.”

“Excellent,” Harry said happily as he was led into the Director’s vault. He checked the ten bodies and found a Dark Mark on each. He also looked the list of names over, recognizing many of them. The Pureblood families were really taking a hit in this war. A glance at the shelf on the side still showed only the locket and the cup. “I assume you haven’t found any new cursed items?”

“It’s interesting you should mention that,” the Director said with a ferocious grin that made Harry nervous. “We believe we have located the Ravenclaw one, but we will be unable to retrieve it for about two weeks, that is, if we wish this operation to remain secret.”

“It would be best for everyone’s health,” Harry agreed dryly.

“My researchers agree that the snake you had listed is probably one as well and that will be very hard to obtain. We are looking into it though.” The old goblin paused and looked at Harry with the grin the boy was not fond of. “And our researchers believe there to be one more.”

“What?!” Harry was alarmed. “A seventh one?”

“Yes, we were surprised too.”

A very old and hunched over goblin came over to join the Director. The very old goblin was accompanied by a much younger goblin, who was carrying a human-sized plain wooden chair over and set it down before leaving. They were still in the Director’s vault.

"Please have a seat, Mr Potter. I'm told this may take a few minutes to prove to you," the Director said. "This is our head researcher." He introduced the very old goblin who shuffled over to the shelf and returned with the locket and cup.

Harry looked at him, wondering what was going on.

"Sit very still," the researcher told him as he walked closer, holding the two Horcruxes out at arms length and side-by-side.

As they got within a foot of Harry, he could feel something in his scar. The closer they got, the more his scar hurt. The pain was intense by the time they were almost touching his forehead. "Enough!" he finally yelled and threw himself out of the chair to his left. The sharp shooting pain in his scar instantly subsided, leaving behind an ache, just like after one of his nightmares where he was sure Voldemort was trying to get into his head. With that, he realized the point of this exercise.

"You're trying to tell me that my scar is a Horcrux, aren't you?" Harry asked hoarsely, truly scared of the answer, even if a part of him was sure what the answer was going to be.

"We will take our reward for finding that," the Director said, looking almost as if he wanted to laugh.

Harry suspected the goblin was laughing on the inside at him. How naïve he was for not realizing there was a Horcrux in him. It would explain so neatly why he had the connection to Voldemort and could feel the Dark wizard's strong emotions. He acknowledged that with a nod. "And do you know how to remove it without killing me?"

It was the researcher who answered in a quivering voice. "You must either murder someone and create a Horcrux with it, which can then be destroyed; or you must have a Dementor remove it and then destroy the Dementor to release the soul fragment."

While Harry thought that killing a Death Eater was a possibility, he was not sure he could bring himself to do the deed. Killing in a battle

was one thing. Killing in cold-blooded murder was another. “Do you know how to destroy a Dementor?”

The Director laughed and held out his hand. The researcher looked peeved, but reached into a pocket and pulled out a small bag and handed it over.

Harry was disgusted that the goblins were betting on his answer until he realized he knew very little about the goblin culture. Still, this did not make him want to get friendly with them.

“Once you have the Dementor suck the soul fragment out of you, if you trap a Dementor with seven corporeal Patronuses and have them all attack at once, it can be destroyed,” the researcher said.

Now that he heard the answer, Harry was not sure which solution was worse. Memories of the end of his third year still haunted him at times. After a few moments of thought, he decided that the decision really was not that hard, based on whom he was. “If you can provide a Dementor for the removal, I will gather friends to destroy the Dementor. I will count supplying the Dementor as destroying the Horcrux and pay the full destruction fee,” he finally said.

“You have seven friends who can create a corporeal Patronus?” the researcher asked amazed.

“Yes,” Harry answered. “How soon can you arrange this?” He was eager to get “the thing” out of him.

“Tomorrow night.” The Director pulled a brass ring about the size of a person’s head out of his coat. Harry wondered how that had fit in there. “This is a Portkey that will take up to ten people to a cave,” the Director told him. “You will see no goblins, but know that we will be there observing the process.”

“You want to make sure I really do this, don’t you?” Harry asked as he took the ring held out to him. He was starting to come to grips with what had happened to him, but he was still slightly in shock at the idea. Why had Dumbledore kept this from him? Surely the old man knew.

"Yes. The Portkey will activate at nine in the evening. Be sure everyone is touching it at that time. It will start glowing just slightly at exactly one minute before it transports your group. Do you have any other questions before we go visit your prisoner?" the Director asked.

"No, I think that will be enough." He shook his head again at the thought of what he had in him. Then the question of how he was going to explain this to Ron and Hermione, plus the rest of the group, hit him. That would be a loud conversation, he thought. "Please show me who you caught."

The researcher walked out of the vault and off on his own. The Director led him out, sealing the vault behind him, and walking down to a guarded cell. "We caught him this morning."

This was the first special prisoner they had presented to him. The others on his special list had put up too much of a fight and had been killed before being brought in -- or so the story went. Harry suspected the goblin warriors were very enthusiastic in their job and rarely gave the Death Eaters the chance to surrender.

Harry was surprised at who was chained to the wall and sitting on the floor. "Malfoy," he called out and almost started laughing.

"Potter. I should have known you would be in league with these animals," the man sneered.

Harry turned to the Director. "If I need more than the agreed upon hour, will that be a problem?"

The Director considered it for a moment. "As long as I get to listen in, you may take as long as you like."

He nodded. "Have someone get you a chair and get comfortable then. I'd like to enter the cell too."

"Are you sure that's wise?"

“I’ll need to borrow your special quill too,” Harry said, ignoring the question.

The head goblin chuckled and pulled his midnight-black quill out of a pocket and handed it over. He also motioned to a guard to open the cell door. After Harry walked in and the cell door was closed, the guard brought a chair over and for the Director, who made himself comfortable.

Harry pulled out his wand and conjured a chair for himself and sat. He was higher than Malfoy, and that seemed to bother the man, which Harry liked.

“Lucius... You don’t mind if I call you Lucius do you?” Harry asked with fake politeness. He was starting to enjoy this far too much. His dark mood from a few moments ago was pushed away.

“Go to hell, Potter,” the man spat.

“Now, now, Lucius, that’s not very nice. You don’t have long left and I’d think you’d want to have a friend at the end.” Malfoy growled, but Harry just smiled as he turned to look out. “Director, is a magical contract valid if the person is under an Imperius?”

“No, Mr Potter, it’s not, which is why I was so surprised you returned with a valid contract with Mrs Lestranger.” The Director had a look of respect on him as he said that.

Lucius looked surprised and alarmed.

“That’s unfortunate,” Harry said and Malfoy started to look smug. “Will potions invalidate a contract?” Harry became smug looking as he watched Malfoy’s face turn pale, knowing that this was the winning answer.

“Not at all, Mr Potter,” the goblin said with a toothy grin.

“Splendid.” Harry pulled his wand back out and cast “Petrificus Totalus”. Malfoy froze. Harry calmly pulled out a small box and enlarged it. Opening it up, he looked among a number of potions that

Hermione had given him. Selecting a strong compulsion potion, one that acted basically like an Imperius curse but was not quite as strong, he went over and forced a double dose into Malfoy.

He put his kit back up as he waited a moment for the potion to take full effect. He also pulled out a small Muggle notebook and a pen. Another way Hermione had rubbed off on him. Those writing materials traveled so much better.

“Now Lucius, let’s see what we can do.” Harry canceled the petrification spell and pulled out a parchment he brought to all of these reviews. He entered Malfoy’s full name into a blank at the top of the contract before placing it in front of Malfoy, along with the Blood Quill. “Sign the contract; it will be good for everyone.”

Lucius Malfoy seemed to struggle a little, but the potion suppressed his self-will so that his shaking hand slowly reached down and picked up the Blood Quill and signed the contract. Harry took them both from him and signed his name on it before pulling out a Galleon and tossing it at Malfoy. He handed the contract and quill to the Director. “If you would execute this, I would appreciate it.”

The goblin took the contract through the cell bars and scanned it; then he laughed. “I assume that you want half of his vault’s worth to pay for all of our fees?”

“I do. It only seems fair,” Harry said.

“And why did you give the other half to St Mungo’s?”

“Because a number of people have been hurt in the war, and because I think a lot more research needs to happen, like looking for the cure to Lycanthropy,” Harry explained.

The head goblin shook his head. “Maybe you aren’t as much of a goblin at heart as I thought.” He looked and sounded disappointed.

Harry shrugged. “We all have our flaws.” He turned back to the prisoner. “Lucius, where does Voldemort normally stay?”

After a moment of struggle, Malfoy slowly said, "At my house."

"How can we get into your house without being caught?"

Malfoy visibly continued to struggle, but he did start talking and took nearly ten minutes to explain how to avoid or override various wards. Harry took careful notes, although he planned to watch this in his new Pensieve to verify what he wrote. Harry also made Malfoy explain who else was there, the state of Voldemort's operations, what Malfoy thought Voldemort's weaknesses were, and who the remaining Death Eaters were. Both he and the Director were surprised at how few were left.

"Why do you think there are so few Death Eaters left?" Harry asked, wanting to know. The goblin seemed very interested in this information as well.

"Many have disappeared or been captured. Word of that has gotten out and the Dark Lord has had trouble recruiting new followers. Dying was something most Death Eaters considered only happening to our victims, never to ourselves," Malfoy stated without emotion.

"Yes!" Harry shouted triumphantly. "I knew I was doing the right thing." He turned to the head goblin. "Director, is there anything else you'd like to know."

"No, Mr Potter. I believe not."

Harry was pretty happy with everything. Malfoy had paid for Harry's war fees to the goblins with a little extra left over for his friends, as well as money to help the public. He also had a lot of helpful information, including the knowledge of where the two Death Eaters he wanted most were hiding.

This also presented him with a dilemma. Information like this was only good for so long. Could he move fast enough?

"Lucius, what was your mission when you were caught?" Harry wondered if his idea would work.

"I was to buy or steal several ingredients for a potion and a ritual."

"How long can you be gone until you are missed?" Harry was breathing very slowly, almost holding his breath as he hoped for a good answer.

"Two days, three at most," came the bland answer.

Harry thought about that as he stood and walked over to the cell door with a smile on his face. He had a chance. The door was opened for him and he walked out.

"I'm curious, Director. What will you do with him now?" Harry was not sure he really wanted to know, and yet, he did.

"Dragons are very hungry creatures and a full-sized man can keep a full-grown dragon sated for most of a week." The toothy feral grin was back.

Harry nodded, glad that the answer was only dragon food. "Can we return to your office? Besides the paperwork I need to sign, I believe I have a few other questions."

The two walked in silence. In the office, the Director placed a bill of service in front of Harry for the eleven Death Eaters, the bonus on Malfoy, and the fee for finding the Horcrux in Harry. Harry signed without hesitation, especially since Malfoy was now financing this. The irony of Malfoy financing both sides was amusing. The questions in his mind were not; they filled him with hope and fear simultaneously.

"It has been a long day, Mr Potter. What else did you wish to discuss?"

The desire for Harry to leave could not be missed. Harry desperately wanted to leave as well, but he had to know a few things.

"Director, just a few questions and then I shall go. If I am to use the information we just heard, I believe time is of the essence. You mentioned that you could not get to the Ravenclaw item for a couple

of weeks if secrecy was required. Is there anything I could do to speed that up so you could retrieve it in the next thirty-six hours?"

The goblin thought about that. "I see your point, Mr Potter. Lucius Malfoy will be missed after a couple of days, and that could cost you the usefulness of what you just heard." He thought for a minute longer. "The item is believed to be in Hogwarts. We had planned to search during what they call Christmas break. I am not aware of how we could speed that up."

"If I could get you full access, no questions asked if people saw you, how long would it take for you to find it?"

The Director looked surprised. "That task has been estimated at eight hours, but who can really say," he said with some uncertainty.

Harry thought furiously, but he could not pull it all together. "I need to write this out," he finally said and pulled out his little notebook and pen. He started scribbling a word or two on each line as he wrote, then he started working out the times, starting at the bottom and going up. He was finally satisfied, although the goblin looked a little upset at having to wait.

"Did you plan to try for the snake or were you going to leave that to me?" Harry asked as he looked over his plan one more time. Malfoy had said the snake was with Voldemort at Malfoy Manor.

"Now that we know how to get into the place where it is, we will try."

It was all Harry could do not to make a grimace at that. "That sounds like a suicide run and will alert him that something is happening. I'd like to suggest a plan to you." He hoped the goblin went for it.

"You may suggest," the goblin said, still on edge.

Harry laid his plan out. The Director objected to a few things, Harry assuaged his concerns or changed his plan slightly. In the end, they had agreement.

“There is one other problem, as I understand magic,” the goblin said. “What about the locket and cup?”

“You’re right; those need to be destroyed sometime tomorrow, before the rest of this. I can come by to watch it done,” Harry offered.

The goblin thought some more. “Are you sure you know how to kill Him?”

Harry smiled very broadly. “I’ve done it once before.”

Goblin laughter filled the office. “You have a deal, Mr Potter. The ring?”

Harry handed the ring Portkey back and the Director waved his hand over it and handed it back. “The time has been changed.”

He nodded. “What time shall I come tomorrow afternoon?”

“Be here at three, Mr Potter.” The Director stood and led Harry back out to the lobby.

Harry quickly made his way back to Grimmauld Place, not long before dinner time.

“Are you all right?” Hermione asked him anxiously. “You were gone for so long.” Ron looked anxious as well.

“They captured Lucius Malfoy and we got a lot of good information,” he told them, purposefully delaying his Horcrux announcement. “The Director and I have agreed to a plan and we’re on a tight time schedule. Let me start a couple of things so we won’t miss our deadlines, then I’ll tell you whatever you want to know.”

Hermione did not look happy with that, as she wanted the details now, but she nodded her understanding.

“Right. I need to see both of your Patronuses right now, as I need to be sure you can still do them,” he said. When Hermione started to object, he told her, “I’ll explain later, but I need to know this now.”

"You better," she said as she pulled out her wand. She cast the spell and her otter came out bold and strong before fading.

"Ron?" Harry directed.

He did the spell as well and a cat that looked suspiciously like Crookshanks came out of his wand.

"Well done, you two. Ron, I need you go contact your brothers and tell them I need five or six people who can cast a corporeal Patronus here at six tomorrow evening," Harry ordered.

"Right, I'm on it mate," Ron got up and immediately left.

"Hermione, I need to you contact Kingsley or Tonks and tell them that I need every Order member and every Auror who is completely trustworthy available at half five in the morning day after tomorrow, so in about thirty-three hours. However, they are not to tell anyone any more than be ready at that time. We'll give them the final details at the last possible moment. I don't want any leaks," he instructed her.

"But Harry!"

"I'll send a letter to Kingsley tomorrow morning via Kreacher. The sooner you arrange this, the sooner you'll get your explanation," he told her with a grin.

She glared at him, but he held steady. After a moment, she huffed and stormed off to take care of her task. Harry used the time he was waiting to write some notes and find his Pensieve.

Ron came back a few minutes before Hermione. Harry pulled out his notebook with his plan and put it in front of him. He also put a copy of his memory of Lucius's interview in the Pensieve for them to watch later. For the next half hour, he told about his afternoon and his plan. His guess had been correct, Hermione had yelled at him. She also yelled at Fate and at You-Know-Who. Harry was surprised, Ron took it all pretty well; he thought it was a mark of Ron really growing up.

After the initial reactions were over, they talked about the plan in detail while dinner was fixed and eaten. The plan was refined several times. Hermione was uncomfortable with it all, but Harry got her to admit it was just because the war was coming to a head and she was afraid for Harry. He was actually more relieved than anything to get this over with. He had a red-haired young lady waiting on him.

At three in the afternoon on the next day, Harry went to Gringotts. The Director was waiting for him in the lobby and personally led him back, although Rocknose joined them as soon as they were out of the lobby. The Commander still looked like he did not trust Harry, but there seemed to be a little respect in his eyes.

At the Director's vault, a small group of goblins waited, along with two humans in chains. Harry instantly recognized them as two of the "Snatchers" that had been captured and interrogated a couple of weeks ago. That brought up a thought that he had forgotten about yesterday.

"Director?" he asked, as they waited for a group of goblins to prepare for the task. "I forgot to mention that we have another twenty-four Snatchers in our custody. Would it be possible to give them to you for their punishment? We really don't have a good way to imprison them long term."

Rocknose grinned. Again, Harry did not want to really know what that goblin was thinking.

"I believe we could take them off your hands, Mr Potter," the Director said very agreeably and with a toothy grin. "Would tonight be too soon? I'm sure the Commander has a few spare men who could handle that while we do the other work."

"Er, sure," Harry agreed. "Do you know where the Shrieking Shack is just outside of Hogsmeade?" At the Director's nod, Harry told him, "I'll arrange to have the prisoners there at nine tonight."

The old research goblin walked up to the group of leaders and nodded. He turned around and grabbed the locket off the shelf and

held it in front of Harry. The request was obvious, as was the threat when Rocknose drew his very sharp looking sword.

Harry slowly drew his wand and cast the revealing spell. The locket glowed red. "Please proceed," he said as he put his wand away.

The very old goblin handed the locket to the prisoner, who held it and looked at it. Three of the other goblins started chanting. A minute later, there was a flash.

To Harry, everything for the next few seconds seemed to happen in slow motion, and it was a scene he would never forget. The prisoner suddenly stood up straight, his arms going straight out as his body tensed, muscles going taut, back arched. His eyes took on a wild manic look and an animalistic growl began. Then before he could do anything else, the very old goblin said something in the Goblin language and Rocknose lunged into motion, moving directly behind the prisoner. His sword swung through the air, catching the prisoner at the neck. Blood gushed out of the wound and pushed the head off the body; the two body parts fell to the floor in opposite directions, still in slow motion.

When both Rocknose and prisoner were still, it was eerily silent. The only movements for a moment were the dribbling of blood out of the dead body and a splotch of blood running down the Commander's sword.

The old researcher broke the paralyzing moment by bending down and picking up the locket and holding it in front of Harry, who could not help but notice that the wickedly smiling Commander now had his full attention on Harry. Harry was sure the three steps separating them could be crossed before Harry could pull his wand out and cast a spell.

With agonizingly slow movements, Harry drew out his wand and pointed it at the locket, his hand shaking slightly. He then did the revealing spell. As the spell hit the locket, it did nothing -- no glow at all. It was now clean. Still bereft of speech at the scene he had just witnessed, he nodded his acknowledgement and put his wand up.

Rocknose wiped his sword on the dead prisoner's clothes before the headless corpse was hauled away.

As the goblins prepared for the second Horcrux to be destroyed, Harry reflected on what he had just witnessed. He assumed they had done that for at least two reasons. First, letting the Horcrux do what it wanted, which was to break free and possess someone, was probably the easiest way to destroy it and still leave the container intact, so they could sell it later. Secondly, he had no doubt that he was meant to witness the ferocity of the Commander. That message could not be missed.

A second prisoner was brought in and the ritual was executed a second time, and it was no less disturbing. Hufflepuff's cup was now free of Voldemort's soul fragment.

There were now only three Horcruxes left, and two would -- hopefully -- be destroyed tonight. The snake and primary fragment would -- hopefully -- be destroyed early tomorrow morning.

As Harry started to leave, the Director cleared his throat. Harry turned to him. "Do not forget about the other prisoners, Mr Potter."

In witnessing the rituals, Harry had forgotten, but he would not admit that. "I shall have them there at nine."

"One more thing, Mr Potter?" The Director held out a parchment and a normal quill.

Harry quickly read the brief document and signed his name to the bottom, authorizing the payment for the destruction of two Horcruxes. A low-level goblin led him out to the lobby and Harry slowly made his way back to Grimmauld Place, as if in a partial daze.

He barely made it into the house before a very worried looking Hermione came running over to him and grabbed his arm to lead him into the living room. "What happened, Harry?" she asked him with a scared look. "You look so pale."

Ron was not around and that might have been for the best, he thought. Avoiding Hermione's concerns would be hard enough at the moment.

"The two Horcruxes are destroyed," he told her with almost no emotion. That had been drained out of him at the bank. "I think I'll lie down and rest until it's time to go. Would you please wake me when people start arriving?" Without waiting for an answer, Harry turned and lay on the couch, facing the back. He needed to be alone for a short while. He was not sure he could sleep, but he could rest.

"Sure, Harry," she softly said before a tentative hand brushed against his shoulder and gave it a quick squeeze before she left.

When he was alone, he rolled to face out and called for his elf. "Kreacher."

"Yes, Master," the elf said after he popped in.

Harry pulled two notes out of his pocket that he had written yesterday. "Take this one to Professor McGonagall and this other one to Ginny. Make sure they get them before dinner and they are both alone when you hand them over."

"Yes, Master." The elf popped away and Harry went back to resting.

Harry knew they were at war. He knew he had condemned people to death with his deal with the goblins. He knew he had killed people already, like the Lestranges. But to see it first hand in cold blood. Harry knew he could never be a professional soldier; it was not in him. It also strengthened his resolve to prevent another Dark Wizard from rising, at least as much as he could.

(A/N: And we're set up for the end game. :)

Chapter 3

In what seemed like no time, making him think he had nodded off, Harry heard voices coming his way. Warily, he sat up and rubbed at his eyes. The voices quieted down and the footsteps he had heard stopped. When he put his glasses back on, he saw a group of people standing there.

Kingsley, Tonks, Remus, Bill, Charlie, and the twins. It was more than needed, but that probably did not hurt. You could never tell when someone might not be able to cast a Patronus when a Dementor was standing there. Ron and Hermione were standing near him.

"Thank you all for coming tonight and being willing to follow my lead," Harry said as he stood, dredging up the energy he knew he would need. "If all goes well, in a little over twelve hours, the war will be over." That simple statement caused multiple gasps and questions. Harry held up his hand and all talking stopped.

"Please don't waste time arguing. I have a plan and we're on a tight schedule." He stopped and took a deep breath before he launched into his explanation. "Just before I was born, a prophecy was made that said there would be a person who could kill the Dark Lord, and that person is me."

"What?" "No, not you!" "It can't be!" ... The denials were shouted but Harry just held up his hand again. Eventually, he got silence.

"Before he died, Dumbledore found out why the Dark Lord did not die when I was a baby." He heard a soft gasp from Hermione, as she realized what he was doing. "He created some things called a Horcrux, which prevented him from completely dying. We have destroyed all but three and we will destroy two of those tonight, with your help. It will be very dangerous, so if you do not feel able to continue, you may stay here for the evening."

There was a nervous shuffling of feet and a shaking of heads. No one left.

He nodded and looked at his watch; they had about half an hour. "Right. One of the Horcruxes is in me and we shall destroy that first." There was more mass arguing and talking but Harry stopped that, ignoring their direct questions.

"At seven, a Portkey will take us to a cave where there is a Dementor. There, you must stand back and let me initially deal with the Dementor. I will let it suck the Horcrux out of my curse scar. Once that is done, then seven of you must cast a corporeal Patronus and attack the Dementor. I'm told that will allow you to destroy it, releasing the soul fragment it took out of me, and probably old souls it has sucked out over time."

"Harry!" Tonks shouted in an objecting voice when he paused.

"It has to be this way," Harry overrode her. "If not, then the Dark Lord won't die and he will conquer the world!" Everyone look down for a moment, before they looked back up with determination. It was obvious they did not like what he had said, but they would follow him.

"Take a few moments to decide which seven will cast their Patronus. One of you will probably have to help pull me back after I have dealt with the Dementor, as I may not be able to walk. Everyone else can stand ready in case something goes wrong or someone can't cast the spell and you have to fill in." He checked his watch. "You've got about twenty minutes for water, the bathroom, whatever." He looked over at one of his best friends. "Hermione? Please get all of your Pepperup potions. We may need those later."

"Sure, Harry." She ran upstairs while the others talked.

Ron clapped him on the shoulder. "I'll pull you away from the Dementor."

Harry smiled at his first young friend. "Just make sure you don't do it too soon or we'll have a hard time trying to find another one tonight."

Ron nodded. "Don't worry, Harry. I understand."

“Thanks.” Harry appreciated his friend more than he could say at the moment.

When seven o’clock came, everyone was holding onto the ring and felt the Portkey’s tug. A moment later, they were standing in front of a cave. An unnatural cold was plainly evident.

Nervous and yet knowing he had no choice, Harry cast “Lumos” and slowly walked in. The others followed. There was a single Dementor in the back of the cave. Harry was not sure why it stayed there, probably goblin magic he thought. He put out his light and put his wand up, letting the light from the others show the way.

Taking a deep breath, Harry walked towards the Dementor before he could lose his nerve.

The Dementor glided towards him, meeting him halfway. The creature grabbed his head and tried to bring Harry’s mouth to its mouth.

The dead and rotting smell of the creature almost knocked Harry out. Fortunately, he held on to his senses. He also had to fight the creature. At the last second, Harry all but fell and his body weight pulled his mouth too far down and allowed his forehead to come in contact with the creature. There was a pulling, a tearing, a fight really. The soul fragment did not want to let go, but the Dementor’s ability overcame it anyway.

Harry felt something burst out of him, much like a boil or blister being popped. The release was as sweet as it was painful. He could not stop his scream. He felt himself falling, but did not hit the ground. He was vaguely aware of floating away as well as a group of silvery animals that ran past him.

A moment later, he was gently set on the ground. Harry struggled and rolled onto his side to watch. There were a multitude of animals attacking the Dementor, which had been pushed against the back wall. In his haze, he barely identified a lynx, a wolf, and a pair of ducks before there was a high-pitched scream and the Dementor’s robes fell to the floor of the cave in a burst of light that made him

shield his eyes for a few seconds. When he could see again, he watched the Patronuses fade away.

Several hands grabbed him and rolled him over to his back. Hermione's face loomed large over him and her hand seemed to be doing something to his head. It took a moment to realize she was wiping his forehead. Her wand was visible for a moment before it disappeared and was replaced by a potion phial and he felt wetness and a warmth on his forehead.

"How do you feel, mate?" he heard Ron's voice ask, concern very evident.

"Did you see the Bludger that hit me?" he rasped, provoking several chuckles from group.

"Your scar is almost gone," Hermione told him as she lovingly messed with his bangs, much as he thought a mother would do.

"I'll take that as a good sign," he weakly said, feeling better with each passing moment. "And the Dementor?"

"It's gone," Hermione assured him. "It sort of exploded and released a lot of little white balls of energy. It's done, Harry."

"You're brilliant, all of you," he said as strongly as he could. "Help me up. We still have things to do tonight."

"Harry, you need to rest," Hermione tried to tell him. Fortunately, Ron listened and pulled him up so he was now sitting.

"Give me a Pepperup potion. I'll rest in a few hours." He looked around. "Bill, I need you to go to the gates of Hogwarts and hide for a while. I have some special visitors coming and I told them I'd have someone to greet them. Take Charlie with you for safety."

"Who's coming?" Bill asked. Only Harry's two best friends did not look interested.

"I don't know exactly, but you'll know when they get there. I'm reasonably sure you've met them before," Harry told him with a cryptic smile. "And please be careful." He looked around for his next helper. "Kingsley? I need you get our prisoners to the Shrieking Shack by nine. I've made arrangements for someone to come take them off our hands."

The tall Auror did not look too thrilled by that. "What will happen to them?"

"I don't really know and I don't really care. However, my personal guess is they will end up as dragon food over the next few weeks."

"Dragon food?" Charlie asked, very interested.

Harry gave a short laugh. "Perhaps, one can't really tell sometimes, but you can help Shackbolt and ask them if you want." He turned by to the Auror. "Kingsley, don't forget the Portkeys for tomorrow morning." He had sent a note to Kingsley via Kreacher with the plan that morning.

"No problem, Harry. I've visited there today in secret to get a feel for where we need to go. I think we'll have about forty people," Kingsley told him confidently.

"Bring three extra Portkeys to the castle, I believe a few of my friends will be joining us," Harry told him, having to guess at the numbers. He was sure some of them would insist on going.

"I'm not sure that's such a good idea, Harry, but I'll leave it up to you to make sure only the older ones go," Kingsley said.

"Of course, it's already arranged," Harry agreed. He turned again. "Hermione?"

"Here, Harry." She handed him a phial which he downed. He was already feeling a lot better, but the surge of energy he felt from the potion made him felt like he could take anyone on. He scrambled to his feet.

“Harry? What about us?” Remus asked as he stepped forward.

Harry thought about it. “I have a task to do at the school, but it won’t take very much effort. Most of the time will be spent waiting and you’ll be a lot more comfortable in your own bed. Tomorrow morning will come early,” Harry reminded the family friend. He looked around. “That goes for all of you. You really should get lots of rest for tomorrow morning.”

“What about you, Harry?” Tonks asked.

He smiled as he thought about his next task. “I have to take care of a problem then I plan to sleep as well.” He checked his watch. It was a little after half seven; he was running a few minutes late. “I have to leave. I’ll see everyone in the morning. Bill, Charlie, Hermione, Ron, I believe we’re all going to the gates of Hogwarts.” He carefully thought about the gates at the school and Apparated away.

Ginny looked at Neville over the dinner table. He nodded back to her before he looked over to the Ravenclaw table and then to the Hufflepuff table, receiving small nods from friends there. She looked up to the head table and got a short nod from McGonagall. Ginny really hoped Harry knew what he was doing.

At the gates of Hogwarts, five Apparation cracks sounded within a few seconds of each other. Harry pulled out his Marauders Map and his broom. He checked the Map to see where he needed to go.

“Harry? Who are we really meeting?” Bill asked.

Harry smiled as he found who he was looking for and stuck the Map back into his pocket. “I don’t really know his name, Bill. I only know him as ‘The Director’. You might have met him before on your previous job, or maybe not.” Harry mounted his broom.

Bill suddenly went wide-eyed. "The head of Gringotts and the English clan of Goblins?! Are you serious?!"

"Nope, I'm not Sirius" Harry replied with a grin, "I'm Harry." He got four groans. "Ron, Hermione. Please start walking to the front door. If something goes wrong, you have the front while I have the back." He flew up and over the gates while his friends walked between them.

A moment later, Harry and his broom were Disillusioned. He savored the moment of flying. He was going to have to do more of this soon, preferably with a redhead behind him or beside him. He stopped in an inconspicuous place and checked the Map again. With a grin, he flew through the courtyard on the side and through an open window and then down the corridors near the ceiling. Soon, he heard the voices he was looking for.

"You sure you don't know who might be coming?" drawled an all too familiar voice. "Like maybe Potter? The wards reported a student coming in the gate."

"I'm positive that I don't know, Severus. I do expect Potter to show up one day, but why would he pick today?" McGonagall asked.

Harry thought that was an artful dodge. He pulled out his wand as he floated about ten yards behind the pair and over their heads as they stood on the porch in front of the main doors.

"Look," she said. "There appears to be two people coming."

As Snape craned his neck to see the visitors, Harry silently cast a Stunning spell and watched the greasy git fall to the floor. He wondered if the git would appreciate everything Harry was doing, he thought with amusement.

McGonagall drew her wand and looked around, but she did not seem too worried.

"Hold your fire, Professor," Harry called out as he floated down to the floor. "Kreacher?"

“Mr Potter, is it really time to end this?” McGonagall asked as the elf popped in.

“Yes, Master?”

“Kreacher, please take Snape to the hospital wing. I shall join you in a moment. Accio wand! Accio Portkeys!” Harry caught Snape’s wand, putting it in a pocket. The single Portkey was Vanished. The elf levitated the man and took him away.

“I truly hope so, Professor. And now for the next part, please,” he asked.

“And I hope you know what you’re doing, Mr Potter,” she told the invisible young man. She pulled her wand and cast a spell. A horn started going off. They could hear students yelling questions and Prefects yelling for everyone to go to their common room.

A minute later, Ron and Hermione walked up.

“Good evening, Professor,” Hermione called out.

“Miss Granger, Mr Weasley, it is good to see you again,” McGonagall said with an actual smile.

Ron nodded and looked surprised to see the usually stern teacher smile at him.

“It’s good to be back, even if only for a little while,” Hermione returned. “Is Harry here?”

“Right here,” his disembodied voice answered before he made himself visible.

She jumped and Ron laughed, earning him a glare.

“I’ve decided to use the hospital wing as my base this evening. If you two will wait here and escort the leaders of our visitors to me when they arrive, I’d appreciate it,” Harry told them. “You can also tell Bill and Charlie they can leave.”

"Sure thing, mate," Ron answered.

Harry turned and walked inside, McGonagall walked with him.

"Are you ready to take over?" he asked her.

"I will temporarily," she answered. "I've never wanted to be Headmistress. I hope Filius will take the position after this is over and we get everything settled. I'll talk to him about it soon, maybe even tonight."

"I'm surprised," he admitted. "I would have thought you would have wanted to be Headmistress."

She chuckled. "No, it's a lot of responsibility and there is no teaching. I like to teach." She paused for a moment before she asked, "What do you intend to do with him?" There was a hint of real concern in her voice.

Harry sighed. "I plan to be a lot more charitable than I should be, considering what he's done to me over the past six years. He'll have a choice, I suppose the rest will be up to him."

McGonagall seemed to relax as they approached the hospital wing. "Thank you, Mr Potter. While he has never been the most pleasant person to work with," Harry snorted and she ignored that, "he has done a lot for us."

"And that is why he'll have a choice," Harry stated as he opened the hospital doors. He was surprised and almost started laughing at the scene that greeted him. Madam Pomfrey was trying to get to Snape to help him, while Kreacher was trying to hold her back.

"Madam Pomfrey!" Harry called.

The nurse turned to face him, looking thankful to see him. "Mr Potter! Please tell your elf to desist!"

"I'm sorry, but I suppose I should have warned you," he said apologetically. "He's only doing his duty. If I may make a suggestion, things are about to get a little exciting and crowded around here and I'm reasonably sure none of them will be patients coming to see you. I might suggest you stay in your quarters until breakfast tomorrow morning."

Pomfrey looked at McGonagall. "I believe he has a good idea, Poppy. I'll be sure to call you if you are needed." The nurse looked at Snape, so McGonagall added, "He's only stunned."

The nurse nodded and left. Harry put up a charm to warn him if anyone approached the hospital wing, and then he approached Snape. To be safe, he tied him up before he woke him.

Snape's eyes snapped open and quickly looked around. "Potter," he sneered. "I should have known."

"Good evening to you as well, Snape," Harry said amicably.

"That's Headmaster to you," the man practically snarled.

"No, I don't think so, because as of this moment, I'm relieving you of your duty."

Snape actually laughed. "Your head is far too big, Potter. You don't have the authority."

Harry conjured a chair and sat down. McGonagall did the same and Snape noticed her for the first time.

"You're letting him get away with this?" Snape asked incredulously.

"Albus told me that one day, Mr Potter would come to me for help and that I must help him. I promised Albus," McGonagall said sincerely. "Mr Potter may not be the official leader of the Order, but he is the functional leader at this moment. You would do well to listen to him."

"Why should I?"

“Because,” Harry smoothly cut in. “I’m about to explain a couple of things and then give you a choice. There are very few Death Eaters left at the moment and I know where they and a certain Dark Lord are right now. In less than twelve hours, I and number of others will be there as well. In twelve hours, I believe this war will be over.”

Snape looked at him in a calculating manner. “And you believe you, a seventeen year old boy, can defeat the Dark Lord, the master of magics you’ve never even heard of, with years of experience you can’t possibly match?” he asked in an incredulous drawl.

Harry grinned. “Yes. The brilliant thing is, I’m not working alone, and that brings us to your choice. If it were totally up to me, based on how you’ve treated me for the last six years, I’d probably just let you be killed on the field of battle and be done with you.”

A laugh escaped Snape. “You, the Gryffindor Golden Boy, kill me? Unlikely,” he sneered the last word.

“And you underestimate me. Did you know that the Sorting Hat wanted to put me in Slytherin?” Harry heard two gasps and received a glare, which caused him to grin. “You also don’t know that I’ve already condemned and sent several dozen men to their death.” He leaned closer to Snape. “I’m the one who started all the Death Eaters fighting each other in the Great Hall and then killed Carrow when she was the last alive.” Snape’s eyes narrowed and Harry could feel the Legilimency probe and looked away to see McGonagall staring at him as if she could not believe what she had just heard.

“I’m also the one that killed all three Lestranges when they were sent to the school the same day the Carrows were killed. Did you know they were killed on the school grounds?” Harry asked innocently.

“You? Impossible...” Snape breathed more than said.

“I also commissioned the deaths of many of the Death Eaters and Snatchers. I’ve hated every minute of this, but someone had to do it. Our society is so messed up, someone had to take out all the trash so we could have a chance to do the right thing for ourselves. Once I realized that, it really wasn’t all that hard to volunteer.”

Snape continued to stare in disbelief.

“Of course, I had a lot of help, as I mentioned earlier. Besides my close friends and some from the Order, I hired the goblins to do a lot of the work...”

“You didn’t?!” McGonagall almost shrieked.

He turned to her. “We agreed upon a very specific contract. They were only allowed to kill marked Death Eaters and those that physically opposed them. I also had to verify each and every person captured. Those that were innocents had their memories removed and were let go. Those that supported the Dark Lord, well, I believe most of them are dragon food by now.”

“You’ve changed,” Snape said softly, still looking like he did not believe it.

“War does that to people,” Harry said a little sadly. “But back to you. My contract with the goblins allows them to collect a fee for any Death Eater with a Dark Mark they find, whenever with no time limit, and you are known to have the Dark Mark. Fortunately for you, they are allowed to hunt Death Eaters only in Britain. So I’m going to give you a Dreamless Sleep potion in a few minutes and you can have time to think about this tomorrow morning. After our battle, I’ll let you go so you will have head start on the goblins. You can hide here in Britain and take your chances, or you can leave Britain and live in safety. I give you the choice only because I do know that you have helped us spy, and because I’m told you did rein in the worst of the Carrows’ brutality.”

“That’s not much of a choice for someone who should receive the Order of Merlin for what I did,” Snape said with derision.

Harry shrugged. “As I’ve found, life is not always fair. If you prefer, I’ll hand you over to the goblins. They’ll be here in a few minutes.”

Snape looked wide-eyed and shook his head.

"Then let's put you in the quarantine room and tomorrow morning, you can leave via Madam Pomfrey's Floo," Harry told him as if he did not have a care in the world. With a wave of his wand, Harry moved the man to the quarantine room in the back. Pulling a Dreamless Sleep potion out of his potions box, he forced it down Snape. After releasing the bindings on the man, Harry locked the door and returned to McGonagall.

"You wouldn't really hand him over to the goblins, would you Mr Potter?" McGonagall asked a little fearfully. "There's no telling what they would do."

"Oh, I'm quite sure they would kill him," Harry said calmly as he pulled his Map out. He looked it over and saw Ron and Hermione leading a number of strange names toward him. He smiled with interest at one of the goblin names. He was also quick to notice a small group of students hurrying towards him too, and one name in particular. He put the Map back up and stood in the middle of the room.

"Why are you just standing there, Mr Potter?"

"I'm waiting, Professor. There are two groups of people on their way here and I think it best to let them come to me. Oh, you should have one of the house-elves pack all of Snape's things and put the locked trunk in the room with him. I think I'll hold onto his wand for now."

Just as he turned around, his warning charm went off and the doors burst open a few seconds later. Without slowing down, a petite redhead with hair flying behind her came running in. Harry braced himself and twirled her around as she leapt into his arms. The feel of her and smell of her perfume was almost overwhelming. He set her down and they kissed as they had the first time, never wanting it to end.

Eventually, they had to break apart. Harry hugged Ginny for all he was worth and looked over her shoulder. There was Neville and about fifteen others. Harry pulled her to his side, his left arm around her shoulders and her arm around his waist.

“Neville, good to see you again, mate!” Harry stuck out his hand. Neville grinned and strode over to shake the hand.

“It’s good to see you back, although,” Neville glanced at Ginny, “I don’t think you’re going to be able to get rid of her now,” he said with a smirk.

Harry laughed. “I don’t plan to.” He raised his voice so everyone could hear. “I would suggest everyone quickly come stand behind me. There is another group that is about to join us. We need to give them room.” The group came over and Harry greeted each one. Each was a sixth or seventh year and a member of the DA.

“Who’s coming, Harry?” Ginny asked.

He did not have to answer as Ron and Hermione walked in the doors, followed by three goblin leaders and eight goblin warriors. The sound of the intake of breaths from behind him did not surprise Harry. He whispered into Ginny’s ear. “You’re going to have to let me go for a moment, but I’ll be back.” She smiled at him and eased her grip on his waist so he could walk forward.

“Director Ragnok, Commander Rocknose, and Researcher Verlyn, welcome to Hogwarts.” Harry bowed at the waist.

Ragnok looked very surprised. “Mr Potter, how did you know my name? I’ve never mentioned it to you.”

Harry gave him a small smile. “At Hogwarts, I have resources that I do not have elsewhere.” He watched the Director look over at McGonagall, and Harry let him assume she was the source.

“As agreed upon, all students in the castle are either in one of the four dorm areas, or in this room. There may be staff in the corridors, but Professor McGonagall will talk to all of the other Professors so they know to stay out of your way,” Harry said.

“Yes, I should start that now,” McGonagall agreed. “Is there anything else that needs to be done, Mr Potter?”

“No, Professor. After you’re done, you may stay where you desire.” Harry looked at her and wondered what she would do. He knew what he was going to be doing.

“I believe I will be in my quarters, resting for tomorrow,” she said.

Harry suddenly remembered one more thing he had to do. “Oh wait! Can we go to the Headmaster’s office? I need to gather one item that should be stored there.”

“Of course, Mr Potter.” McGonagall looked very curious.

He turned back to the goblins. “Director, your team has a little less than ten hours to find the item we need. I’ll be here in this room when you need me.”

The three goblin leaders nodded and all the goblins left.

“Neville, make everyone comfortable. I’ll return soon.”

“Right, Harry,” Neville said agreeably.

Harry and Ginny, with her tightly holding onto his hand as if to prevent him from escaping, went with Professor McGonagall to visit the top office. The gargoyle jumped aside for her as she led them up.

“What exactly are you looking for, Mr Potter?” she asked as they entered the office.

Harry grinned and walked over to a display case. “This!” He opened the case and pulled out an ornate handled sword in a plain scabbard.

“Is it time, Mr Potter?” the Sorting Hat spoke up from its place on the shelf.

“It is,” Harry said, before he shrank the sword and scabbard down and put it a pocket. He really wanted to keep it secret until it was time to use it.

"You know, we thought about sneaking in here and stealing that for you," Ginny said.

McGonagall raised an eyebrow at that and Harry chuckled. "I'm glad you didn't," he told her. "I'm sure the punishment for getting caught would have been horrible, considering who was in charge at the time."

"Who says we'd get caught?" she asked impishly.

"Hopefully you wouldn't have, but you have to plan for the worst case too. Well, we should get back and Professor McGonagall has a task before she sleeps as well," Harry said as he started walking Ginny to the door.

"Breakfast will be a five, Mr Potter. That should allow us time to eat before we start tomorrow morning," McGonagall said.

"Yes, that's a good plan. Good night, Professor."

"Good night, Mr Potter, Miss Weasley. Please be careful." She sounded concerned.

Harry smiled and led Ginny back to the hospital wing.

Ginny sighed as they walked. "I can't believe you're finally back. You know you're not getting away now, don't you?"

Harry chuckled. "And for most things, I'm just fine with that."

"Most?" she asked with a slight edge to her voice.

"Well, I might have to go to the bathroom from time to time," he said teasingly, and she blushed prettily. "I'll need at least a few minutes alone tomorrow morning as well," he said with sudden seriousness. "I have my final duty and you can't be holding my hand when I do that."

"But I'll be nearby?" she asked with the tone that implied there was only one right answer.

“Of course, I won’t deny you that as long as you understand it won’t be a picnic. People may get hurt or even killed, even me,” he said soberly.

After a long moment in which she realized she had no choice, she agreed and he kissed the top of her head just before they walked back into the hospital wing.

Once in the doors, everyone there looked at him. It was Neville that had the courage to speak first. “Harry, is it really true what you told me in your note. Are we really about to end all of this?”

Harry looked them over as he stood there, an arm around Ginny’s shoulders. “Tomorrow morning I will go hunting You-Know-Who.”

Harry really was not worried about the Taboo on Voldemort’s name anymore, as no Snatchers seemed to exist anymore. They had tested that out over the last week. However, there was no need to give his position away in case someone was monitoring the Taboo sensors.

“Others will be going with me and you are invited to come along. It will be dangerous and there is the possibility of you getting hurt, as well as the possibility of death.” He wanted to be sure there were no bad assumptions. “But if you want to help the Wizarding World, you are welcome to come with me to remove the last of the Death Eaters and You-Know-Who.”

They actually cheered and Harry was embarrassed. He heard many of them say they wanted to join them and have a happy world again. He completely agreed with that thought.

“If you’re going, I suggest you find a bed and make yourself comfortable. Breakfast is at five in the morning,” he said with a grin, one that broadened at all the groans he received.

“Harry?” Ernie called out. “I may not be a Ravenclaw,” there were several laughs at that, “but even I can see that there are not enough beds for all of us here.”

He could not help it, he rolled his eyes. "Are you or are you not users of magic? Conjure a bed if you need one, or cast a cushioning charm on the floor," he paused and an mischievous grin came over him, "or share with someone, as long as clothes stay on." He turned slightly and cast an enlarging charm on the bed nearest the door; the bed grew to be twice as wide.

Several of the boys gave a growling laugh and high-fived their nearest mate before searching for their favorite witch, most of whom where blushing and looking demurely down.

Harry chuckled at their antics and pulled Ginny over to his chosen bed, where he took off his boots and leapt on the bed. While he arranged the pillows so they could sit up against the headboard and talk for a few minutes, Ginny took her shoes off. She joined him a moment later and snuggled next to him. He put an arm around her and held her close.

Ginny sighed as she snaked an arm around his body and settled in.

He looked around the room and saw several other couples settling in together on enlarged beds, including Ron and Hermione, Ernie and Susan, and Seamus and Lavender. Neville and Hannah were a surprise to him, given the ruse he knew Neville and Ginny had portrayed. He wondered how those two had worked something out.

A gentle hand touched his cheek and pulled his head down. He saw Ginny push her neck and head up. They shared a gentle kiss.

"I've missed that so much," she told him when they parted and her cheek was back on his shoulder.

"Me too," he agreed. "I look forward to many years of that."

Ginny just nodded on his shoulder and held him tightly as if he was her favorite stuffed toy. Harry enjoyed holding her and being held. He would win tomorrow just for her. The rest of the world would benefit, and he was a little glad to save most it, but the real reason to win was this beautiful woman. He drifted off to sleep thinking of her.

A finger tapped his shoulder and Harry's eyes sprang open. He assumed it was Kreacher telling him it was time to get up, and he was initially surprised to see the Director standing in front of him with Rocknose at his right. Then he remembered why the goblins were there. He hoped they had found the item.

"Mr Potter," the goblin said softly, obviously trying not to wake anyone else up. Ginny stirred slightly but seemed to stay asleep. "I believe we have found it, but we can not get to it. Could you come look to see if you can use one of your resources to get to it?" The goblin looked pained to admit that they were failing.

Harry nodded. In trying to gently slide out from under Ginny, who was sprawled half on top of him, she rolled over and sat up. One look told him that she had awakened when the goblin had come and that she had faked being asleep. Apparently, she really planned to go everywhere with him for awhile. He found that amusing and pleasing.

He handed Ginny her shoes and he put his boots on. When they were both ready, he stood up and held out his hand, which she took with a smile and stood too. With a nod to the goblins to lead, the two followed.

The group was soon on the seventh floor and they came to a group of goblins around a section of wall, opposite a tapestry of a wizard trying to teach trolls to dance. Researcher Verlyn was doing something with his hands, but nothing happened. As the group stopped behind the very old goblin, he turned to them with fatigue on his face.

"I know what we seek is behind that wall, but I can not get to it. A door opened once an hour ago, but it looked like a goblin eating hall. There is very strong magic here, but I can not unravel it." The researcher had a strange tone, which Harry suspected was goblin frustration.

"You are in front of the entrance to the Room of Requirement, or the Come and Go Room, as the elves name it," Harry explained. "You just have to walk back and forth in front of this spot three times

thinking of the type of room you need, and it will appear. Someone on your team must have done that and been thinking of food,” he said with an easy grin.

The researcher closed his eyes and grunted. “Then there are an almost unlimited number of rooms. Finding the right one will be almost impossible without destroying the magic of the room.”

“Theoretically, yes,” Harry drawled, trying to think quickly. “But I think I can find the room you need.”

Everyone nearby had been listening in, but now all the research goblins turned to look at him, highly interested.

“In fact, I’m wondering if I’ve even seen the Ravenclaw item before and did not know what it was at the time,” he mused out loud.

Ginny chuckled. A frustrated Verlyn glared at her and she instantly shut up and looked contrite as she inched a little closer to Harry.

“Give me a moment,” he told his girlfriend and pulled his hand from hers. He thought back to the day he had to hide a Potions book. Thinking of a room to hide things, he walked back and forth. A door appeared and Harry opened it. He was pleased to see a room filled with junk. “Try over on the left side about half way back,” Harry instructed.

The team of research goblins went in. Harry and Ginny watched from the doorway. The goblins made little motions with their hands and seemed to zero in on an area very quickly. A few minutes later, the head researcher came out carrying a headdress with a blue stone in his hands. He also had a smile on his face.

“This way,” the old goblin said and led them to a nearby classroom, one that was not normally used.

The second Harry looked in, he knew what was about to happen. He stopped and pulled Ginny to the side, not letting her go in.

“Ginny, I have to watch and verify this thing’s destruction, but I don’t want you to have to see this,” he explained, almost begging.

“Harry, I can take it if you can,” she argued.

“Gin...”

“Harry! I said I can do this and I want to. I said I would stand by you and I will,” she said forcefully.

He noticed the Director and Rocknose were standing to the side and watching with what looked like amusement. He ignored them. “Gin, part of destroying that thing involves killing a wizard.” She gasped. “It’s a Death Eater we’ve caught, but he will still be killed in cold blood. That’s what you’re asking to see. Please stay in the corridor, for me?” he begged.

She looked into his eyes for a moment. Then she stretched up on her toes and lightly kissed him. He thought he had convinced her until she said, “I love you, now let’s get this over with.” She turned to the doorway and pulled him in after her. He heard laughter behind him, but he decided it was best to ignore it.

Apparently, everything was already set up. Verlyn let him verify they had found a Horcrux before the goblin walked over to the wizard in chains and handed him the headdress. The goblins started chanting and the transfer happened. Again, Rocknose swung his blade and the man’s head and body separated.

Ginny had watched it all, but when the severed head hit the floor, she turned and hid her face in Harry’s chest. Harry verified the headdress was now clean.

“All that’s left is the snake,” Harry said into mostly silence. The only other noise in the room was the goblins cleaning up the mess after the ritual.

“And Tom Riddle,” the Director said. “I must eat before the hunt begins. We start promptly at six, Mr Potter. Do not be late.”

"We'll be there," Harry promised as the Director handed him an invoice for finding and destroying a magical item. Harry signed it after a brief glance.

Harry led a slightly dazed Ginny back to the hospital wing. They did not talk until they got there.

"I think I'd be sick if I had anything on my stomach," Ginny whispered.

Harry would have grimly laughed because he had warned her, but he knew he would be in trouble if he did and the subject was far too serious anyway. "I tried to stop you from watching," he whispered back.

"You did," she agreed, "but I'm glad I watched. I now understand the war a whole lot better. War is ugly."

"It is," he whispered solemnly. He looked at his watch and saw that it was half four. Harry kissed her cheek and said, "If you want to use the bathroom before anyone else gets up, you better hurry."

She nodded and then hurried to the one bathroom in the hospital wing.

Harry lit one lamp on the wall to give a dim light. "It's half four and time to get up if you need to do anything before breakfast," he said in a normal voice. That elicited some groans, but people started to wake up. A small queue formed for the bathroom and some of the boys went to a bathroom down the corridor.

Breakfast in the Great Hall was a quiet affair. There were sixteen students, plus the Golden Trio and two professors. McGonagall was quietly talking to Flitwick. Everyone was sitting at the Gryffindor table with Harry at the end.

"So, how've classes been recently?" Harry asked to try and take some people's minds off of the coming action.

While all looked at him, only Neville seemed be of the mind to answer. "Fairly good and mostly normal. After all the Death Eaters left, Snape

sort of took over Defense. He gave reading and homework assignments, but he didn't teach any -- sort of like fifth year," he said with a grin.

Hermione gave a harrumph, as if she was glad she had not been here for that.

"Muggle Studies was canceled," Ernie added. "I guess they figured we didn't need that class with their view of the world, and with no teacher for it."

"Sounds like we didn't miss much," Ron commented. Ginny gave him a dark look.

Kingsley showed up at half five and walked straight to Harry and knelt down beside him. He handed over three coils of rope as he started talking very quietly. "These Portkeys will go off in about twenty minutes, blinking one minute before they leave. Have everyone who comes with you spread out. I plan to ring the Manor so no one can escape. The Floo is already off. Anti-Apparation and Anti-Portkey wards will go up just after you get there. The Order and the Aurors all know the plan; you just have to explain it to those here. Good luck, Harry." He got back up and left, not even stopping to talk to the teachers; he only gave them a curt nod.

As Kingsley Shacklebolt walked out the door, Harry stood. Everyone looked at him and waited. He could see the hopeful look in their faces, but there was fear there too. He silently offered up a prayer to someone that all would come back alive.

"We leave in about twenty minutes to go to Malfoy Manor where the last handful of Death Eaters and You-Know-Who are supposed to be. You'll have between two and ten minutes to get into position. If all has gone right, they will be there and all avenues of escape will have been cut off, except for flying away; so keep your eyes open for that. There will be others there, join them where you wish. The plan is to encircle the house, and when the signal is given, fire a Blasting hex at a window and followed up by two or three Fireball hexes. It's OK if several of you pick the same window. The goal is to burn the house

down as fast as possible to flush whoever is in, out, with none of us getting hurt.”

“Harry?” Hermione called out. “What if there are innocents inside?”

He swallowed, which did nothing to help his slightly dry throat. “We will have to hope that no one is stuck in there, and that any innocents can run out. If that’s not true, then I’m sorry to say, they will become victims of war.”

There were murmurings about that.

“Hey!” he shouted and they all quieted down. “I’m sorry it has to be that way, but we are all but done with this. Hundreds have already died because of them, and if we don’t end it now, it will be millions who die.”

There was absolute silence now after his outburst.

“Just before I was born, there was a prophecy made that said I would be able to kill him. So if I don’t, then no one else can and we don’t want that, do we?” Everyone shook their heads at that logic. “We do not want to miss this chance to end the war. Again, I’m sorry this is so harsh, but remember this in the future to help prevent another war so we don’t have to fight again.”

“Now, when people start running out of the house, open fire. Do not wait. If they look like a prisoner, stun them; otherwise, the spell of the day is the Blasting Hex, Reducto. Use it for everything. If your conscience doesn’t allow you to use that on another person, even one who would rather kill you than look at you, then use the Stunning spell.

“Sometime in all of this, You-Know-Who will come out. When he does, fire the Blasting Hex at him. It won’t kill him, only I can do that, but it will greatly distract him, take his shield down for me, and weaken him if it hits. I need him weakened, distracted, and without a shield. Once he is where I want him, I will tell either Hermione or Kingsley that I’m ready and they will cast a Fireworks spell, one of those that shoots up a lot of red sparks and falls down like a waterfall. When you see that,

fire one last spell and then halt and watch. Two seconds after the Fireworks spell is when I will make my move and I don't want any friendly fire to hit me. You don't want any friendly fire to hit me either, as that would make Ginny angry, and you don't want Ginny angry," he finished with a grin to lighten the moment.

That created a number of smiles and a few nervous laughs.

"One last piece of advice, since we'll be in a circle, when you are aiming at a target, if there is someone on our side across from you, aim at the waist or lower on your target, so that if you miss, the spell will hit the ground and not someone on our side. If there is only the house behind your target, feel free to aim for the body. Are there any questions?"

"So just a few Death Eaters and You-Know-Who?" Terry Boot asked.

"That should be it. There will also be a big snake on the loose there, but our goblin friends will be searching for it. And you don't want to hit a goblin with your spells either. They are the ones that killed most of the Death Eaters over the last six weeks," Harry pointed out.

Several people grimaced.

He looked at his watch. "You have about five minutes before you should crowd around someone with a Portkey. Ginny, Ron, Hermione, Neville, Luna, follow me," Harry called and then turned around and walked to the side of the room.

Ginny grabbed his hand and the other four stood loosely in front of Harry.

"You four," he nodded at those in front of him, "have the second most important task after mine. Whatever it takes, keep Ginny safe."

"Harry!" she growled.

He put a finger lightly on her lips and looked deeply into her eyes. "I told you that you could come and I meant it, but if you're not safe, then I will be distracted and fail. It's the same reason I walked away

last June. I'm not being as stupidly noble this time, but bodyguards are what you have to endure if you come," he told her firmly, his look brooking no argument. "It's either that or you stay here with Professor Flitwick."

She still looked like she wanted to protest.

"Ginny?" Everyone looked at Neville. "Remember we talked about Harry being the leader and sometimes leaders have to do things they don't like..."

She understood and hung her head. "Like this morning," she mumbled.

"Like this morning," Harry answered.

"What happened this morning?" Hermione asked, very curious. Ron and Neville looked interested as well.

"Ravenclaw's diadem was freed," he said. Hermione and Ron nodded. Neville and Luna still looked confused. "They'll explain it later today."

He pulled out the short ropes Kingsley had given him. He walked over to Professor McGonagall and Ernie, giving each of them one. He held onto the last. "These five are with me. Everyone else, please grab one of the other two Portkeys." The Ministry Six were back together again, and that made Harry feel good.

The Portkey started to blink. "One minute, everybody." He looked around and saw everyone but Flitwick holding onto a piece of rope. Just before it was to activate, Harry shouted, "Good luck and everyone please come back safely!" Then the Portkey kicked in.

They landed in the country-side a few seconds later. Only Ron's hand on Harry's arm kept him from falling. "Thanks," he quietly told Ron.

People could be seen at the edge of the trees that mostly surrounded the large house. Harry had to agree that the Malfoys had lived in style, a style that was about to go up in smoke. Looking around, he saw the

other two groups of students had been sent down a ways, so they were not all together but mixed in with the adults.

It was time for him to get ready. He pulled out his wand, Invisibility Cloak, broom, and sword. He handed the small sword and broom to Ginny to hold while he Disillusioned himself and put his Cloak on. He then took the broom and enlarged it and Disillusioned it too. The same process was repeated for the Sword of Gryffindor and he hooked the scabbard to his belt.

Inspecting the ground, he found a fist-sized rock and picked it up. The idea had worked once and no one else knew about it, so why not try it again, he thought. "Everyone, stay sharp," Harry commanded. "I'll be back as soon as I can, Ginny." He leaned over and gently kissed her. She was startled for a second, but quickly realized what he was doing and kissed him back.

Those nearby saw the floating rock move back and away.

"You don't know how weird it looked to see you kiss nothing," Ron commented, sounding almost a little disgusted.

"Then don't watch," Ginny told him pointedly as she drew her wand and faced the house. Her expression and stance spoke of her determination to end this war.

Ron just shook his head at his sister and faced the house too.

Harry flew around the circle about twenty feet in the air. Everything looked good. He stopped near the other leader. "Kingsley, we look good. Start whenever you want."

"What about our friends?"

"I'm sure they're here. It's almost six, isn't it?"

"Yeah, in about two minutes."

Harry nodded, not that anyone could see him. "Start in one. Hermione is over by that big tree on your right. Once He shows up, I'll be near one of you two."

"Good luck, Harry."

"You too, Kingsley. And thanks for all your help."

Harry flew around to the back side to watch there. He thought Voldemort would come out the front, but he wanted to watch here first. The Malfoy's wards had already been silently taken down, so he could fly high and watch most of the yard, but the sun was just starting to come up and there was not enough light to see what was on the ground while flying that high.

A few Blasting hexes were shot and then suddenly, about sixty more were fired. The noise was almost deafening. Then the Fireball hexes went next, he watched the streaks speed towards the house, going inside. The outside of the house almost certainly had fire suppression wards, but not the inside. Someone had even gone for the uppermost tower window, five floors up. He would have bet the Weasley twins had done that.

A figure suddenly came out the back door. It was on the thin side and blond. Harry watched Draco take two Stunners and four Blasting hexes before he was knocked down, six other curses going over his head and leaving burn marks on the outside of the house. The boy did not get back up and that put a smile on Harry's face. The git deserved it for what he tried to do to Dumbledore, Katie, and Ron, he thought.

Still flying twenty feet above everyone's head, Harry went around the circle to the front and saw the real battle. Three people had just come out and were on the porch with a fourth person in the doorway. None of them lasted long with over twenty wands trained on such a small area. Harry noticed someone summon the bodies away from the house, but canceled the spell before they reached the caster.

Harry was about to fly around to the back again when Voldemort came to the front doorway. Spells started flying; most of them hit his

shield and bounce away. Some landed at his feet and made it hard for Voldemort to stand. Harry smirked as he saw how people used different spells. It was also plain to see that Snake Face was under so much pressure that he could not take the offensive. Some of the Blasting hexes were making it through and Voldemort was slowly taking a beating.

The fire was also taking its toll and Voldemort had to move out beyond the front porch to avoid being barbequed, which allowed a few more people to start firing at him, hitting him from the side and even slightly in the back. Harry's group was showing no mercy, just like Voldemort showed his victims no mercy. Harry was proud of them for being willing to do the hard and right choice.

Suddenly, arrows were flying through the air from out of the trees. Harry tracked them to a point just behind Voldemort. Flying a little higher, Harry quietly shouted, "Yes!", as he saw a large snake turned into a pin-cushion with no less than a dozen arrows in it. It stopped moving a few seconds later and then started to slowly blacken from the heat of the fire.

Quickly as he could, he flew around to where Kingsley was, as that gave him a better angle. Hermione was more straight on, and that would have put the house in Harry's way.

"Kingsley, it's time for fireworks."

"Are you sure, Harry? He's still got a lot of life in him."

"I'm sure, just do it," Harry commanded. His wand went into his left hand and levitated the rock out to about twenty feet in front of him and slightly on the right. He put that hand on his broom handle, the tip of the wand in front of his broom. The Sword of Gryffindor went in his right hand. Harry was willing to bet that Voldemort did not know about the Sword of Gryffindor, or if he had heard of it through legend, Harry doubted Snape would have told Voldemort about it.

Kingsley shot the Fireworks spell and Harry said "one thousand" to himself and then accelerated as fast as he could. The sword was his

real weapon; the rock was insurance, and something to break a shield if it was there.

Voldemort almost fell over as the barrage of spells let up and he was not having to stand against spells being thrown at him. For reasons known only to himself, he smiled before he raised his arms and shouted. "You can't kill me! I'll..."

The rock hit Voldemort's right side just under the armpit pulverizing three ribs and came to rest next to his heart, pinching it. Harry did not bother swinging the sword. He just held it out to his right as he flew slightly behind his nemesis. The magically sharp sword easily cut through an arm, a neck, and another arm. Harry's arm was pulled back a little, but not that much, the sword was so sharp and he was flying so fast.

Harry slowed and curved his flight just enough to easily look back and watch the severed parts and body fall to the ground. The Dark Lord never knew what had literally hit him -- either time.

All was silent for about three seconds and then a roar of cheering started.

Relief was the biggest feeling that hit Harry. Relief at being done with the stupid prophecy. Relief at being able to be normal. Relief at not having to worry about he or Ginny being caught by Death Eaters or a Dark Lord.

Slowing so he could fly with no hands, Harry sheathed and shrunk the sword before putting it back into a pocket. He preferred that no one see it, despite the evidence of it behind him on the ground. He also pulled his Cloak off and canceled the Disillusionment on himself and his broom. More cheering went up when people could see him, especially from his friends. Without wasting a second, he headed straight for his girlfriend.

Ginny engulfed him in a hug the second he was on the ground. He hugged her back just as tightly as she was holding him. As he started to pull back, she lunged forward and gave him a kiss, which he was very willing to return. Unfortunately, it did not last very long as people

started coming up to him and slapping him on the back in congratulations.

Harry finally pulled back from Ginny, although he left his left arm around her waist. The Malfoy house took that moment to start collapsing. The upper three stories fell down into the lower floors.

“Tell those in back to come this way, and bring the bodies over too,” Harry shouted to be heard over all the other shouting. He saw Kingsley lean over to Tonks and then she started to jog away from the group.

Harry tried to answer people who congratulated him as he walked towards the Death Eaters on the ground. By the time he got there, Tonks was leading those from the back towards the other group and levitating the body of Draco Malfoy. She placed him next to his mother. Harry checked her arm and became a little sad when he saw it was clean. She had had time to get away over the years and had not, so he did not mourn her. Narcissa had made her choice.

There were two other Death Eaters he did not recognize, but the last he did, silver hand and all. Kingsley was next to him, so he turned to the man.

“Kingsley, I know it’s too late to do him any good, but can you make sure it’s known that Pettigrew was killed today and get Sirius’s name cleared?” Harry asked, a little sadness still in his heart over his dead godfather. The hurt had become lesser over time, but he still missed the old dog.

“I’ll do my best, Harry,” the Auror promised.

Arthur and Molly Weasley came over, having been with the group in the back and gave Ginny and Harry each a hug before they stood near their daughter and almost a son.

The house collapsed a little more and spread too, so everyone walked a little further from the burning building.

Harry also realized that the loud cheering was now over and people were starting to talk amongst themselves.

“Did anyone get hurt or get killed,” he asked Kingsley.

“Only a few injuries, luckily,” Kingsley said with relief. “Being spread out with no one behind anyone else really helped, as did our numerically superior numbers.”

That was said much like Hermione would have and made Harry grin for some reason. He was ready to go, but there was one thing left to do here. He pulled out his wand and cast “Sonorus”. “I’d like to thank everyone here,” Harry’s magically loud voice said, instantly getting everyone’s attention. “I know that there will be those who attribute all of this to me just because I got in the last blow. But I know and I will tell anyone who asks that this was a team effort and I could not have landed the last blow without those of you here as well as others.”

There was cheering and whistling. The good mood was infectious.

“Today was brutal in its own way. I also know that this war has been ugly and we have all lost people we know and love.”

No one made any noise at all now. Each was reflecting on their losses; many had lost loved ones.

“I hope each of you remember this and make others know too so we don’t have to repeat this. When there is a problem, we can solve it much easier if we all work together.”

There was more cheering for a moment.

“I know that each of you has done things in this war that you’re probably not proud of; I know that’s true for me. But that is the price of war and I thank each and every one of you for paying it. Go home as soon as you can and spend some time with someone you care about. That is why we fought, for those we love. Quietus.”

The cheering erupted again as did more hugs and pats on the back. In fact, his back was starting to get sore.

Before he could leave, a paper memo soared through the air and hit him in the chest. He grabbed it before it fell. Opening it, he read and started to laugh as he saw a bill for the finding and destruction of a cursed item. Trust the goblin director to want payment as soon as possible.

Harry yelled, "You can party as much as you want, but we're going back to Hogwarts."

"How had you planned to get back, Harry?" Molly Weasley asked. "I suppose Kingsley can make arrangements since he brought us all here."

"We'll see you in a week when the Hogwarts Express arrives in King's Cross for Christmas break, Mrs Weasley," Harry said impishly as he embraced Ginny tightly. Then thinking very carefully of the front gates of Hogwarts, Harry Apparated them back to school. Harry made a mental note to ask Ron later about his mother's expression after he had left with Ginny.

The couple arrived back at the school, and there stood Director Ragnok, Commander Rocknose, and a squad of goblin warriors.

"Director." Harry let go of Ginny and bowed. "I would like to express my appreciation to you and your teams for their efforts. I know I hired them and they were only doing their job, but the successful result speaks for itself and their hard work," Harry formally told him.

"It has been a pleasure doing business with you, Mr Potter. At first, I was not certain that I had made the right decision, but I could see that the cost of lost business if you lost the war would have far outweighed the cost of helping."

Harry nodded acknowledgement. "I also believe you have something for me to sign?"

The Director smiled and pulled out a parchment and quill. He also motioned a young goblin to come over and turn around, bending slightly, so Harry could use his back as a desk. Harry added another

fifty thousand Galleons to the bottom of the figures and then signed. It was easy to spend Malfoy's money.

"A bonus for you for such timely service. I'm sure you can have a nice party with that. I believe this concludes our business?" Harry could think of nothing else they had left to do.

The goblin looked at the contract and gave a toothy grin. "It was our pleasure, Mr Potter. If you ever have other work for us, like a small uprising you need put down, feel free to contact me."

Harry chuckled. "I shall remember your offer."

"There is one last small matter left undone." At Harry's confused look, the Director said, "We know of one Death Eater left alive: Severus Snape."

"Ah, yes. Well, since he actually did help us by spying, I gave him permission to make a run for it. If you find him on the British Isles, you are free to take care of him. I believe the bonus I just gave you would easily cover that fee in advance."

The Director frowned at the loss of closure but said, "I understand."

"I must be going, but I wish you well, Director. May your gold always flow," Harry bowed.

"May your days be good," the Director intoned and left with a flick of his hand.

Commander Rocknose waved a gnarly hand and the warriors all left, leaving him there alone. He suddenly stood straight and beat one fist to his chest over his heart and held it there. "I did not think you were worthy of the title Warrior, but I have seen that you make the hard decisions for your kind and not back down. You even slew your foes with your own hand, spilling the blood of your enemies with cunning. I salute you, Warrior Potter."

Harry was moved. He was sure the hardened goblin's words were high praise, even if he wished he had not had to earn them. Bringing

a single fist up to his chest, mimicking the goblin, Harry stated, "And I salute you for your hard work, Commander Rocknose, and the hard work of those you lead. May you blade always stay sharp." He hoped that was appropriate.

"May your enemies be crushed under you!" The goblin flicked his hand and left.

"Bloody hell, Harry!" Ginny gaped at him. "The goblins like you. That's ... that's unheard of."

He gave her a goofy grin as he pulled his shrunken broom out. "And that's a day in the life of Harry Potter." He joined her laughter as he enlarged his broom. "Fancy a ride, my lady?"

Ginny climbed on behind him and hugged him tightly. He flew directly to the hospital wing, going in a window again. He was pleased to see that the room was empty.

Harry shot a locking charm at the entrance doors and walked over to the quarantine room. He unlocked that door and opened it. Inside, Severus Snape was awake and sitting on the bed. Harry shot a shrinking charm on the trunk there and picked it up.

"It's time for you to leave. I told the goblins that you were leaving the British Isles, but they will still be watching for you here. I suggest you Apparate to the continent as soon as possible, after you use Madam Pomfrey's Floo to go somewhere they won't expect," Harry told him.

Snape got up and looked down at Harry. The perpetual sneer was present, but he was not doing anything overt. "Since you're still alive, I assume the Dark Lord is completely dead?"

"Correct. He's in pieces and to the best of anyone's knowledge, you are the last living Death Eater. Peter Pettigrew, Draco Malfoy, and two others I couldn't identify were killed this morning," Harry said without remorse.

"Many would say that it is dangerous to spare me," Snape calmly said, as if discussing a meal.

"You survive by a margin slimmer than you can imagine, especially after I know you killed Dumbledore." Harry was not sure how he was keeping his temper, but he was.

"He made me promise to do so if there was a choice between him and Draco. He wanted to give Draco a chance to choose life, and you ruined that plan," Snape coldly said, "just like you ruined so many other plans."

Harry wondered what Snape knew and realized he would never get another chance to find out. "Did you know what Dumbledore's plan was for winning the war?"

"Most of it. The Golden Trio," he practically spat, "were to find and destroy all the Horcruxes and then you were to willingly sacrifice yourself to the Dark Lord." Ginny hissed and Snape shot her a disapproving look. "That was to remove the Horcrux in you. You should not have died because your blood was in him. After that, you would have had to find a way to kill him. I believe he had some method in mind that he was trying to point Granger to, but I was not privy to that."

Harry shook his head in disgust. "Thank Merlin I didn't do that. I don't think that would have really worked, especially since he didn't tell me."

"He couldn't have told you, you dunderhead," he said scathingly. "If he had, you wouldn't have willingly sacrificed yourself."

Ginny gasped. "That's why Harry was put with the Dursleys and then always sent back there after everything bad happened, wasn't it? He was supposed to feel guilty and hate himself enough that he would do the sacrifice."

Snape raised an eyebrow. "You're not as much of a waste as I thought, Weasley. Maybe you are a good match for Potter after all. I guess your fawning all over him got his attention."

Harry felt extreme anger at the insults against Ginny. He threw the fist sized trunk at Snape's stomach, which the man caught. "Get out of here. Get out of Britain. If I ever see you again, I'll personally truss you up and throw you onto Gringott's floor in London and gleefully pay triple the hunting fee," he said coldly.

"You are so much like your father," Snape sneered. "An arrogant, egotistical, ..."

Harry pulled out Snape's wand and snapped it, causing the ex-Headmaster's eyes to go wide and the man to go silent. "You just had to insult my family one last time, didn't you?" He dropped the broken wand to the floor and pulled out his wand. "If you plan to use Madam Pomfrey's Floo, I suggest you run for it now. Ginny and I still have energy after the battle and I'll only give you a five second head start, Snivellus. One --"

Ginny let an eager look out and pulled out her wand. Snape sprinted out the door of the little room, barely missing bumping shoulders with Harry.

"Two --" Harry shouted and moved to the doorway to see which way Snape went. Unfortunately, the door to the nurse's office was unlocked and the man jerked it open. "Three --" Snape disappeared into the office and Harry started walking that way, with Ginny right beside him. "Four --" Harry could look through the doorway and see most of the office, but not the fireplace. As he loudly spoke, "Five!", there was a flash of green light from inside the office.

Harry looked in and saw that the office was empty and that there was no place to hide in there. "Bastard!" he snarled.

"I wouldn't have blamed you for doing something to him, Harry," Ginny said with animosity in her voice as she put her wand up.

He was shaking his head as he put his own wand up. "The war is over, he doesn't have to play spy anymore, and he still can't let the grudge against my father go. The greasy git!"

"Which we'll never have to see again." She grabbed his hand and pulled him towards the infirmary's main doors, only to find they would not open for her.

"Sorry," he told her and pulled his wand and unlocked them. "I didn't want to be interrupted."

"I understand."

"Where are we going?" he asked, still breathing a little harder than normal as his desire to fight ebbed.

"I'm hungry and a second breakfast sounds good. Also, a lot of people probably want to see you to make sure you're still alive."

He groaned. "Please -- no. My back is sore from being slapped so much this morning already."

She chuckled and continued to pull him along, not that he was trying to hold her back; she was just walking faster. "We'll get this out of the way and then I think we need to spend most of the next twenty-four hours talking. We've got a lot of things to discuss, especially with you running out on me," she told him, her tone brooking no disagreement.

"I'm sorry, Ginny, really. I was just trying to protect you..."

"Uh, huh. We'll discuss that a whole lot more. If you're really apologetic and we work everything out," she smiled ever so slightly, "we'll see about some kisses too."

Harry was not sure whether to gulp or to lick his lips. "Er, right." He finally decided that simply agreeing with her was the best option at the moment.

"I'm always right, Harry, and don't you forget it," she told him imperiously, although a big smile slowly came over her.

As they walked into the Great Hall, everyone started clapping and cheering. Harry looked around and saw everyone giving him a standing ovation, including all of the Slytherins. Apparently, they had

not liked life under the Death Eaters either. At the head table, McGonagall and Flitwick seemed to be leading it all, or at least they looked like they were trying to clap the loudest.

Harry blushed and ducked his head as he headed for the Gryffindor table. When the cheering did not stop, he meekly raised his hand and waved. A few people whistled and the cheering petered out.

When the students all sat down, McGonagall called out in a loud voice. "Very well done, Mr Potter. Please see me after you finish breakfast, I have something special for you."

He waved an acknowledgement and took a seat at the end of the Gryffindor table. Ginny sat beside him. Ron, Hermione, Neville, and the rest that fought with him moved down to be near him.

"Where were you, mate?" Ron asked as he helped himself to a second breakfast, like the rest of the early risers were doing. "You left before us and yet got here last."

"Oh, I had to make some trash vanish and it took a few minutes," Harry vaguely explained.

Ginny giggled and they all looked at her. "I was just agreeing with him."

Most of them started talking about the morning, answering questions to the younger students. The first years were especially in awe of Harry, having heard many stories about him, many of those exaggerated.

When breakfast was done, Harry stood and looked to the head table. McGonagall waved for him to follow her and she went towards the room the Triwizard Tournament champions had gone to after their name had been drawn. Flitwick was following her. Ginny grabbed Harry's hand, as if to prevent him from getting away, and they went after the professors.

The professors looked only slightly surprised to see Ginny walk in too, but they said nothing about her presence. McGonagall put a privacy spell on the door.

“Mr Potter,” Flitwick addressed him. “As you probably know, the present term ends next week. After the Yule holiday break, I will take up the position of Headmaster.”

Both he and Ginny gave very surprised looks.

“Professor McGonagall prefers to remain the Deputy,” he explained.

“I do not wish to deal with all of the paperwork and I enjoy teaching too much,” McGonagall added.

Harry nodded. “It will be a shame to not have you teaching Charms, Professor.”

“Thank you, Mr Potter,” the short man said graciously.

“Uh, not to be rude, but why are you telling me this?” Harry asked, not having a clue as to where they were going.

Flitwick gave a cat eating the canary smile. “Considering what you have just done for the Wizarding World, I hate to ask this of you, but I believe it will also help you as well.”

Harry was not sure he liked what he had just heard, wondering what he was going to be manipulated into now.

“Whether you realize it or not, you have created three vacancies on our staff over the last month or so. The former Headmaster is gone, so we’ll need a Charms teacher as I take the Headmaster position. We’ve also lost the Muggle Studies and Defense teachers as well,” Flitwick listed, his grin still very prevalent.

“I would also strongly guess that you would like to be at Hogwarts for the rest of this year,” he nodded towards Ginny, “but you really have no way of enrolling now as you’ve already missed too much of this year.”

"I had planned to ask about doing my seventh year next year, starting in September," Harry quickly interjected.

"That would be acceptable," Flitwick allowed, "but there is only one way you could stay in Hogwarts for the rest of this year. You would have to join us on staff."

Ginny gave a sharp intake of air and Harry sputtered. "W-What?"

"I need a Defense teacher for the rest of this year, Mr Potter. I realize you haven't passed your NEWT for it yet, so you could only be an Assistant Professor, but you could run the classes your way. As long as you are covering the material, and there are standardized lesson plans ready for you to guide you, then I would not interfere in your teaching. Despite your title, I would treat you like a full professor."

"Me, a teacher?" Harry barely got out, mostly swallowing the last word.

"Your experience with the Defense club you ran in your fifth year is well known by us and the OWL and NEWT results of the students under your teaching was literally Outstanding. Your seventh year might be a little awkward, so I would recommend you take your Defense NEWT at the end of this year and skip the class next year. I believe you'll have no trouble at all with that NEWT, since you'll be teaching the material this year." Flitwick's gaze intensified. "So we know you can do the job and you would gain a level of privacy that you would have trouble finding in the normal world, Mr Potter."

"I, uh, I don't know what to say." This was mind boggling to him.

"I do," Ginny piped up. "He'll do it on one condition."

"Ginny!" Harry protested. "I haven't said yes yet."

"Hush, Harry. Your girlfriend is taking care of your best interests." She turned to Professor Flitwick, who had an amused smile. McGonagall was hiding hers better, but the corners of her mouth were twitching.

“What do you think Mr Potter should ask for,” Flitwick casually asked, clearly amused based on his tone.

“In the classroom, Harry will treat everyone the same, but during his personal time, he will be allowed to date one student without penalty,” she said, and looked like she dared them to say no.

“That would be highly unusual. Fraternization with students is clearly forbidden for professors,” McGonagall said, as if it should be obvious.

“But, Harry would only be an Assistant Professor,” Ginny countered.

Flitwick laughed jovially. “She has us there. The policies do not discuss Assistant Professors, so I suppose we can make the rules to be whatever we want. Very well, Miss Weasley, I will accept that condition.”

Ginny looked up at her boyfriend. “Harry? Remember that you promised me not to leave me again.”

McGonagall’s hand flew to her face so a full smile would not be seen and her reputation maintained. Flitwick had no such image problem and let a chuckle escape.

Harry closed his eyes for a moment and sighed deeply. “What have I gotten myself into?”

“You love me and you know it, Harry,” she persisted.

His arm went around her shoulders and he squeezed her against his body for a few seconds. “Merlin help me, but I do, very much.” He looked at the short professor. “Very well, I’ll take the position.”

“Thank you, Mr Potter,” Flitwick said very happily and shook the boy’s hand. “There is much to be done at the moment, so it will be late next week before we get together to work out the details.”

“Er, sure, Professor,” Harry agreed.

“When we’re in front of students, that would be correct. When we’re in private as we are now, you may call me Filius,” Flitwick explained.

“Professor?” Ginny asked. “Will we be having classes today?”

“No, Miss Weasley,” Flitwick answered. “I think today will be a day of celebration. Why do you ask?”

“Because I thought you should know that while we’ll be in the castle, Harry and I need to disappear and talk some things through, so please don’t worry if you don’t see us for awhile,” Ginny told him.

Flitwick looked at McGonagall and got a small nod. “Very well, Miss Weasley. You are a Prefect and Mr Potter is an Assistant Professor. I also understand that you are both teenagers and have not seen each other for several months; however, I still ask that you abstain from any personally compromising activities. I hate the situation where I have to tell a mother that her daughter is pregnant. Do I make myself very clear?”

Harry and Ginny both quickly nodded, each looking a lot like an excitable house-elf at that moment.

“Very well. I do ask that you do not tell anyone about your new position until the new year, Mr Potter,” Flitwick requested.

“Certainly. Is on the train ride back acceptable?” he asked.

“That is acceptable. We’ll discuss it all next week. I’ll be in contact,” Flitwick said. “Run along and have some fun today, but not too much fun,” he said with a smile. “Come find me when you’re free, Mr Potter, and I shall assign you a room to stay in.” The reserved smiles he got in return warmed Flitwick’s heart. They were good kids, he thought, as he watched them leave.

“What do you think?” Minerva asked. “Head Boy and Head Girl next year?”

He nodded. “Just like his parents,” he said with a smile, reminiscing a little. Flitwick shook his head after a moment. “So, I have an idea for

someone for Charms, but I thought a Squib or Muggle-born would be best for Muggle Studies. Do you know anyone available for that, Minerva?"

"Actually, I do," Minerva replied as they started to walk back towards the Headmaster's office. "I know a squib who has been living in the Muggle world and would probably teach, at least for the rest of this year, worst case.

"Speaking of Squibs, I think it's time for Argus to retire. What do you think?"

McGonagall thought for a moment. "Unless you can get him to take a more even approach, I have to agree." She looked at her colleague. "You do know that Harry has his father's Invisibility Cloak, do you not?"

"No I didn't, but thanks for telling me. All the more reason to have him on our side -- and her too. Do you have any doubts about them?"

"Them? Good heavens no," Minerva adamantly said. "The only question will be if they are married before they return for next year or wait until after they graduate."

"Hmm, I guess we need to go look up the policies about married students, just in case we need that information," he told her.

Ginny made herself comfortable on Harry's lap. The Room of Requirement had given them a very nice room, much like the Gryffindor common room, but cozier. Kreacher had been called to bring drinks and they knew they could call the elf for food when they wanted it.

"Now, tell me everything you've been holding back for the last year," she gently told him, not in a bossy manner like Hermione might have. "I think we need to work through some things you experienced and I can't help you if you don't tell me."

“OK,” he easily told her, tired of keeping secrets from her. “You’ll share too?”

“Yes, and no secrets for either of us. If something is uncomfortable, say so and we’ll take it slowly. You can ask me questions about what happened here later. We’ll get through this together,” she told him caringly. “It will be good practice for later too.”

“All right.” He liked the idea of being with her later.

“And Harry, never ever doubt that I love you. I wouldn’t do this or have put up with everything from anyone else but you,” she gently said before kissing him very softly on the lips, more of a brushing of lips.

“I love you too, Ginny.” He pulled her close, resting her head on his shoulder so he did not have to watch her look at him. Parts of this would get ugly and hard to get through. “I guess I’ll start at the beginning. I know I told you part of this this morning, but it will make more sense if I leave nothing out. Not long before I was born...”

(the end)

(A/N: Here’s an idea I had that would not leave me alone. This is one of those things that was just simple enough I could keep it mostly in my head and just sit and write. That’s something I don’t do very often, because longer stories require planning.

This Harry probably would not become an Auror, but I’ll leave what he would become to your imagination. This Harry (and Ginny too) would not name his children Albus or Severus. The respect isn’t there.

I’ve said it other places, but I think it’s appropriate to repeat here. I admire JKR for her work and effort in creating the HP universe and writing the stories she did. However, I was also deeply disappointed in book7 (and 5 and 6 to some extent). Book7 had so much potential and I think it was mostly wasted. The book could have been so much better. I’m not saying that this story is better than her book7, but I think my story makes more sense logically (or it does to me. :) Of course, much of my disappointment may come from the fact that

there are some very good fan-fiction writers out there who have spoiled me with some very creative and well written stories.

Again, thanks to XRaiderV1 for being the beta for this story. I have more stuff on my hard drive to be cleaned off while the next chapter of Lily's Child continues to work its way through the process. My next few will only be on this site on as they are not SIYE compliant.

I hope everyone enjoyed the story. -- Kevin)